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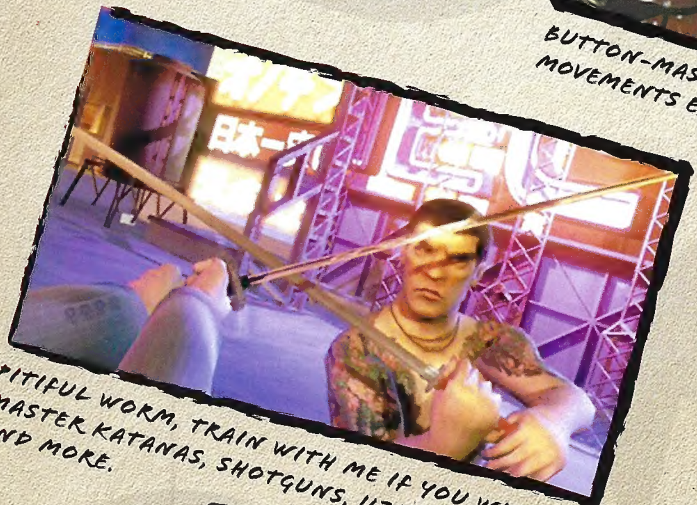

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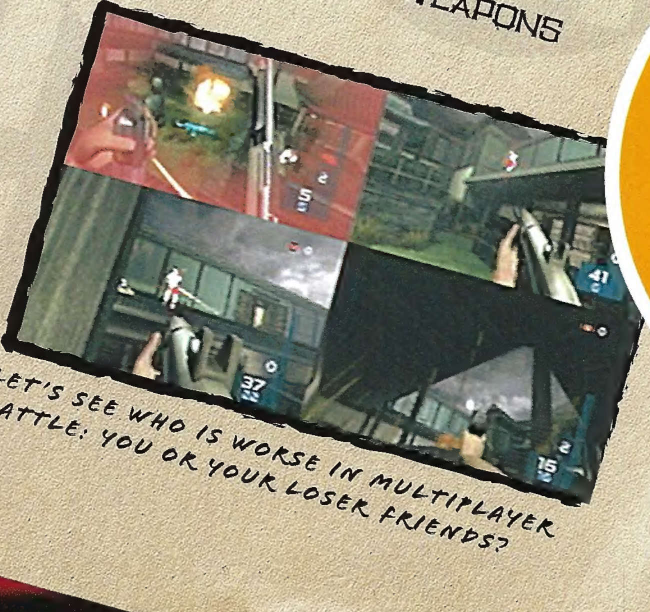

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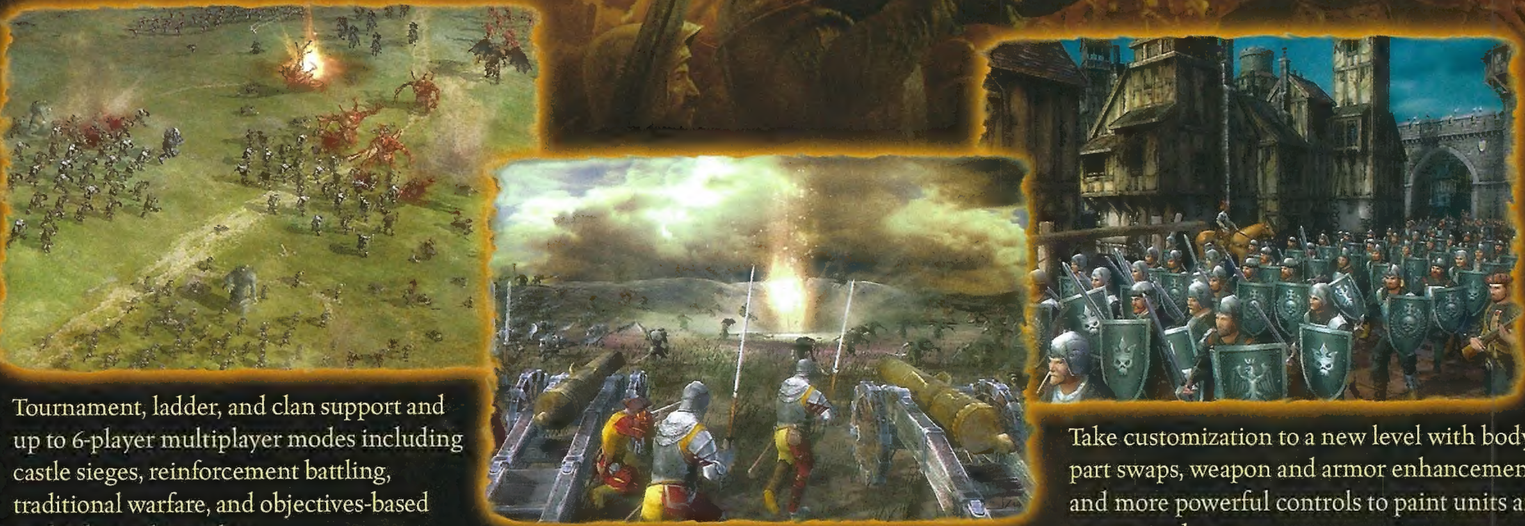

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Art by: **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

The eagle hasn't landed

I've been through my share of console launches on the press side of the fence…Nintendo 64, Atari Jaguar, Sega CD, Sega 32X, Sega Saturn, Nintendo Virtual Boy, Game Boy Color, Game Boy Advance, Nintendo DS, PlayStation, PlayStation 2, Dreamcast, Xbox, PSP, and the Xbox 360. And the standard procedure has always been the same. 6-10 weeks before the console ships we receive what have come to be known as "debug systems"—consoles created for developers and press so that we can play pre-alpha or beta games so we can do our jobs: report. Normally we'll have hands-on coverage the issue before a new console hits and then review coverage timed to hit at the time of launch. With the Nintendo Wii and PlayStation 3, however, this hasn't been the case. The only coverage any journalists have been able to muster is via Gamers Days, where hordes of journalists get hands-on time in an event-like setting, or 3rd-party visits. Not exactly the ideal way to experience the consoles we'll all be living with for the next 5 to 7 years. So when you don't see any new console reviews in this issue you know why. We managed to spend enough time at Sega to review Monkey Ball for the Wii but otherwise all of our PS3 and Wii coverage, while "hands-on," was done out-of-house. You'll also notice that there is no Gears of War coverage or review in the issue. The biggest Xbox 360 game of the year and no review copies for the press. We'll get ours a few days early for a review online but normally you'd be staring at a 4-6 page art-soaked layout on such a game…just as you would Viva Piñata. No review copies of that one either. You might see one "exclusive" Gears of War review but otherwise—crickets. Sounds like Epic games worked on it until Microsoft killed the power and said "hand it over!" The way I look at it, who doesn't know that Gears of War is going to be an event game? It has a day named after it! Do you really need us to tell you it's a landmark title? Psst; it's a landmark title. We did that months ago when we interviewed Cliffy B. It's more about the layout to me to mark the occasion in history. But do we review it next month? Would you care? Is it worth the pages a month after it's out? And I did my piece on Viva…You all know what it is and if you're going to buy it. Like you don't know I'd give it a high score…please. Not having debugs to do our jobs I find inexcusable. We are professionals after all (this is our livelihood) and we deserve the opportunity to share with our readers how a console performs. Reporting that could actually affect your decision to brave the early stampede or hang back and wait. The bottom line is that every publication is different—you choose the one that's right for you, that most represents your tastes. But do you buy or subscribe to a magazine for the reviews or to read about people and information you can't get anywhere else? I know the answer is both, but shouldn't the emphasis be less about slapping scores on games and more about real reporting? We have reviewers that specialize in every genre and it will always be a part of what we do, but in this day and age what would you rather see? Smaller reviews like we did back in GameFan—viewpoint style (multiple editor capsule reviews) or more features and opinion pieces? You've chosen us and so I want to make sure you get your money's worth. Now if you'll excuse me I have to go check Fed-Ex for those debugs… *Shit!*

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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Sonic the Hedgehog
Silver, Sonic, and Shadow-ready for action

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playback

December 2006

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LETTER OF THE MONTH

War...what is it good for?

I've been pondering why there is such a large percentage of war games appearing in the console game market. I find it distressing that while America is in the middle of very nasty war, so many of our young people seek games that let them experience the thrill of life and death struggles against other human beings as part of a military machine. This could have never happened during the Vietnam war, and the reason is obvious. There was a draft back then and young people were all too aware that they might soon be experiencing the real thing. They would have little stomach for the fantasy of it. Many would say that military conflict is a natural subject for a video game because it offers unlimited scenarios for conflict, and action-based conflict is what a video game is all about. I say that is a failure of imagination. There are many other types of visceral conflict that don't involve the objective of killing other human beings, in particular conflicts that involve survival in a hostile universe.
Of course the problem here is that it takes us into a realm where there is more to do than point and shoot. There would have to be problem solving and strategic thinking beyond just taking cover and finding ammunition. Such a game would take a lot of smart people to create and then there's the question of would it make money. Done right, I think it would. I challenge the video game industry to produce such a game, a smart, action-filled game that's about the struggle to survive, about keeping human beings alive, not killing them.

Henry

> **"I find it distressing that while America is in the middle of very nasty war, so many of our young people seek games that let them experience the thrill of life and death struggles against other human beings..."**

Has Sony lost it?

Not to say that the PS3 launch line-up doesn't look pretty good, as it does. But Sony's only contributing THREE games to show off the power of their system. Genji: Days of the Blade, which actually looks impressive, still has to overcome the "giant crab" and "maximum damage" jokes. Another, NBA 07, will probably pale in comparison to 2K Sports' NBA 2K7. And then there's Resistance: Dawn of Man, which will no doubt be the big game for launch. This is slightly disappointing to me. Where's Gran Turismo HD? Warhawk? Heavenly Sword? It seems the killer apps are once again waiting in the wings, while Nintendo automatically has a big gun, Zelda, working for them.
I understand that a game takes time to develop and such, but I think Sony could've gotten the ball rolling to showcase the true power of their system. But then I suppose that's what the amazement of a second generation is for.

Just ranting,
Robert W.

Lord of the Lego

First let me start by saying your magazine is the best gaming mag I've yet to behold. The style and artwork are top notch and you write like you enjoy what you do and your reviews are insightful (unlike some other mags who are just bitter). But enough ego stroking let me get down to what I want to ask of you. You guys are in the biz. Could you please ask the geniuses at Travelers Tales, the ones behind the Lego Star Wars franchise, if they could find a way to make a game, or 3, using The Lord of the Rings movies. Lego Lord of the Rings! Think about it. How sweet would that be? I know you guys have that kind of pull. As a loyal subscriber this is all I ask. And if EA Games says no just say, "why not? You're not using the franchise for anything good"! Ooooh, can you feel the burn?!! Thank You.

-Joshua"THUMBSTIX"Leafe

Careful what you wish for...

I was once a huge reader of the magazine but in recent years my interest had waned a bit for one reason or another. Then a couple of months ago I was at a used bookstore and picked up a few back issues of Play and was hooked again. I loved GF and GR after that and then of course Play which is by **far** the best looking and written gaming mag on the shelves. Well to get to the point I saw that Nick des Barres has a Japan section now and I really loved that as he was my favorite GF reviewer (blue super shadows not withstanding). So as I was reading the various issues there was one thing I felt there could be added to the anime section that **no** other magazine has. A great cosplay area but not just any cosplay; **really** well done costumes with photography that matches them. Now I'm not a huge fan of cosplay at all--it never really interested me until I saw this girl Mary Elam's work. She shoots things like a really well done FFVII Cloud costume in an actual setting that suits him rather than just outside of some convention center as most of cosplay photography is. She has some amazing work on a metal gear solid 3 shoot that is just awesome http://lillyxandra.livejournal.com/38417.html. I just know that there are a ton of cosplayers that are dying for a section or even occasional article featuring things like this and this girl is already on top of it. A friend of mine and I were talking the other day and he said something that inspired me to write this and it was "Not all gamers are into cosplay but **all** cosplayers are into gaming" I don't know it just made me think that this may be an interesting new and fresh section for the magazine. Well thanks for the time and I hope to hear back from you guys.

Thanks a ton

Zac J

Weird like Dave

Ever since the first copy of your magazine that I browsed through and shortly thereafter purchased, I have given up even glancing through any other game publication. Never before have I seen a magazine that seems to have put my thoughts on the shelves.
Especially Dave, a man who eerily seems to think exactly as I do when it comes to all things gaming. His letter is the first thing I read every month. From his choice in games to his thoughts on the industry...it's creepy I tells ya.
Which brings me to my point: Endangered games. Games that pull you into their world and refuse to let go even when you've shut the console off. The games that you can't wait to play after work. Games such as Okami (greatest game ever), Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath (R.I.P. Oddworld Inhabitants), ICO, Primal, or Beyond Good and Evil (the last three were referred to me by your publication and did not disappoint). And games that aren't even out yet but you can just tell that they've got the magic, like Viva Piñata. Which recalls to mind a blurb I saw in a rare instance of picking up another gaming mag (it was a friends I swear!). It had a screenshot from Viva Piñata and a caption beneath it saying something to the effect of "lamest...game...ever." Now I remember why I don't read these other gaming mags.
I used to work in the local and only game store in my little Alaskan town and everyday, many times a day I would hear the same old question: "What do you recommend?" My heart would skip a beat at this question for the chance to introduce someone else to any of these Endangered Games. Sadly though, the vast majority of the time after I had shown the customer these games, I would receive a response similar to, "This looks gay/retarded/lame! The graphics aren't cutting edge and there ain't no Hollywood actors/rappers/designer clothes/gangbangers/drugs etc. etc." My heart would break and my fury would rise at these responses! It reminded me of the closed mindedness of those other gaming mags. It made me want to scream in their little pig eyed face, "Well what did you ask me for!?"
But every so often I would manage to lead some open minded soul to these games and every single convert I made would always return later that week or even sometimes that same day to tell me how amazingly fresh and awesomely...well, awesome, these Endangered Games are.
These few souls and your magazine have given me hope for these Endangered Games. So you keep bringing us coverage of these amazing games, and I'll keep playing them, supporting their developers and your mag.
Now if you'll excuse me, I have some Stray Beads to find.

Darin "Derwood" Marker
CW "Baby Steps"

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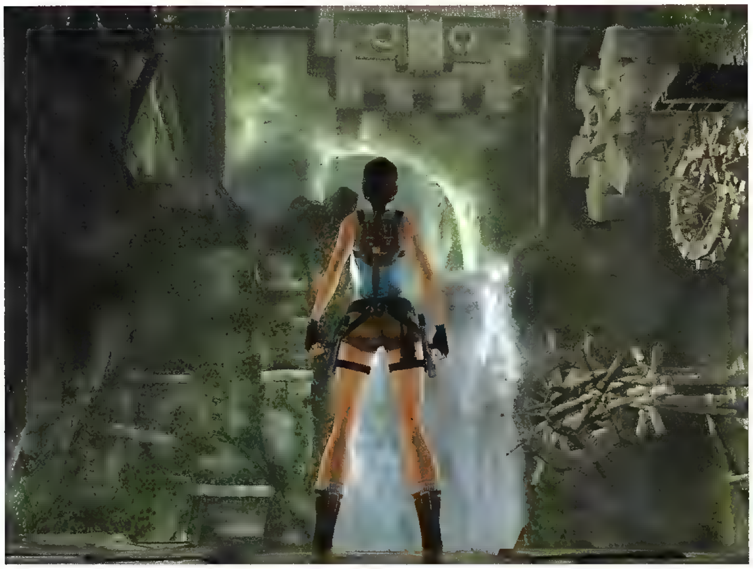
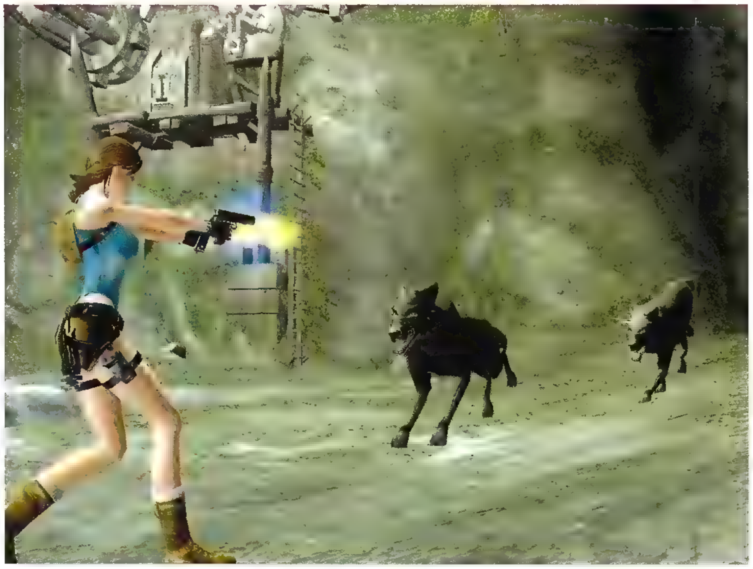
A return to glory

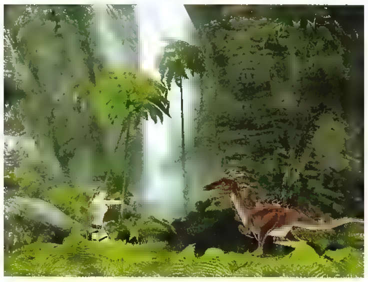
Fond memories are new again in Eidos' stunning Tomb Raider redux





It's been ten years since the rugged, indomitably sexy Miss Croft changed the way we look at adventure gaming—and the female lead—pillaging her first exotic tombs in the original Tomb Raider. What better to celebrate her PS One immergence into gaming than with a retelling of her very first adventure, with Lara Croft: Tomb Raider Anniversary.

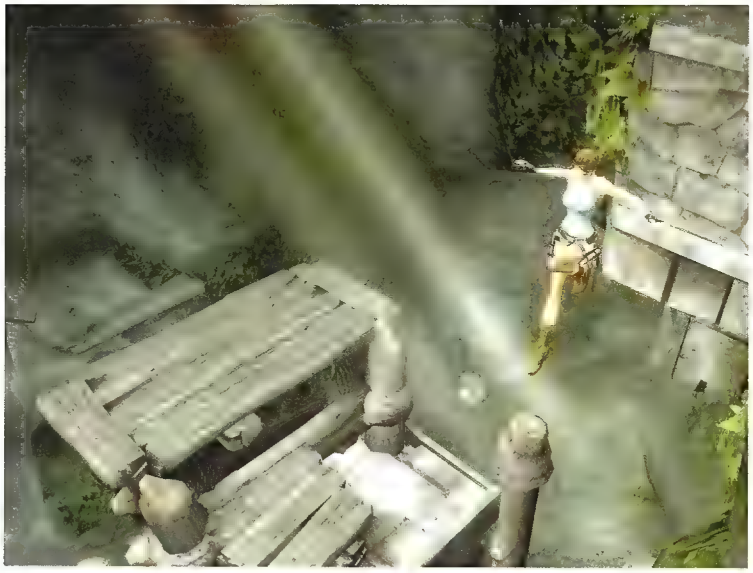
Coming out next year for PlayStation 2 and PC, this modern redesign of the classic Tomb Raider is proving to be a lot more than a simple technological rewrap of the original package. Tomb Raider Anniversary is inspired by Lara's inaugural adventure, but all new assets have been tapped to create a game that is as new as it is faithful. It's the spirit of Tomb Raider Crystal Dynamics is searching to maintain, as they work off your nostalgia while retooling a lot of gameplay elements to keep in step with modern sensibilities. Some of the larger set pieces that worked like a charm are being embellished for much grander scope and scale. New paths are being added to open the world up, providing a denser, more challenging mode of adventure. Puzzles you remember, like the simple cog in the wheel, are being turned into tasks that require more steps and points of logical approach. Thanks to the Tomb Raider: Legend engine, the game looks incredible, with the sense of isolation that dominated the original experience being keyed in on.



I remember you! ...Just not looking this good!

> "...this modern redesign of the classic Tomb Raider is proving to be a lot more than a simple technological rewrap."

LARA CROFT
TOMB RAIDER
ANNIVERSARY



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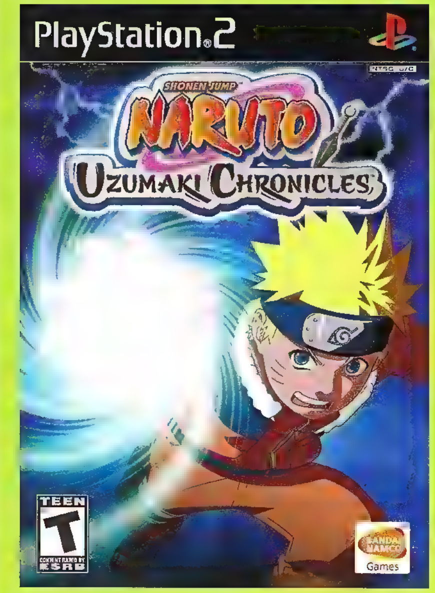

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Database

December 2006

[illegible]
THQ / Xbox 360

Yeah, ahem, we saw this one coming...Did the cover, oh yeah.

[illegible]
EA/Xbox 360, PS2, PC, Xbox

It's football season, so what else is going to dominate the charts than Madden football?

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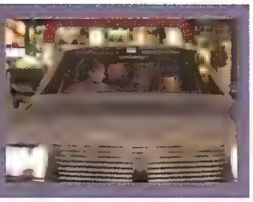
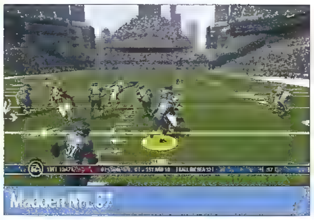
Capcom / PS2



Coming in at number 3 Play readers seem to enjoy the good life, Yakuza style.

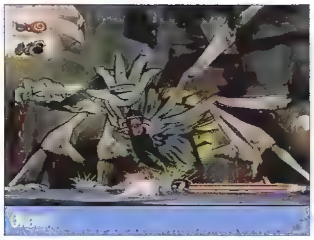
	NPD Group Top Ten September Game Sales
01	**Madden NFL 07** EA / PS2
02	**Saints Row** THQ / Xbox 360
03	**Lego Star Wars II: The Original** LucasArts / PS2
04	**Pokemon Mystery Dungeon: Blue...** Nintendo / NDS
05	**Madden NFL 07** EA / Xbox 360
06	**Pokemon Mystery Dungeon: Red...** Nintendo / NDS
07	**Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy** LucasArts / GC
08	**Madden NFL 07** EA / Xbox
09	**Star Fox Command** Nintendo / NDS
10	**New Super Mario Bros.** Nintendo / NDS



Madden NFL 07

Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy

	Reader Top 5
01	**Okami** Capcom / PS2
02	**Dead Rising** Capcom / Xbox 360
03	**Yakuza** Sega / PS2
04	**Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins** Capcom / PSP
05	**Splinter Cell: Double Agent** Ubisoft / Xbox 360

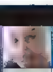


Okami

	Reader Most Wanted
01	**FF XII** Square Enix / PS2
02	**Metal Gear Solid 4** Konami /PS3
03	**Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess** Nintendo GC/Wii
04	**Resident Evil 5** Capcom/PS3
05	**Halo 3** Microsoft/Xbox 360

Final Fantasy XII

play magazine Editor Top 5/Now Playing



Dave Halverson

- **Sonic the Hedgehog** Sega / Xbox 360
- **Gears of War** Microsoft / Xbox 360
- **Final Fantasy XII** Square Enix / PS2
- **Death Jr. 2 Root of Evil** Konami / PSP
- **Marvel: Ultimate Alliance** Activision / Xbox 360

Brady Fiechter

- **F.E.A.R** Sierra / Xbox 360
- **Yoshi's Island DS** Nintendo / NDS
- **Splinter Cell Double Agent** Ubisoft/ Xbox 360
- **Rogue Galaxy** SCEA / PS2
- **Dead Rising** Capcom / Xbox 360

Greg Orlando

- **Civilization IV** 2K Games / Macintosh
- **Thrillville** LucasArts / Xbox
- **WWE Smackdown Vs. Raw 2007** THQ / Xbox 360
- **Phoenix Wright... Justice for All** Capcom/ NDS
- **Phantasy Star Universe** Sega / PSP

Casey Loe

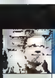
- **Tales of the Abyss** Bandai Namco Games / PS2
- **Final Fantasy III** Square Enix / NDS
- **Dead Rising** Capcom / Xbox 360
- **Okami** Capcom / PS2
- **Final Fantasy XII** Square Enix / PS2

Heather Campbell

- **Final Fantasy XII** Square Enix / PS2
- **God Hand** Capcom / PS2
- **Guitar Hero 2** RedOctane / PS2
- **Phoenix Wright Ace Attorney** Capcom / NDS
- **Gurumin: A Monstrous Adventure** Mastiff / PSP

Nick DesBarres

- **Jojo's Bizarre Adventure** Bandai Namco / PS2
- **Gyakuten Saiban 2** Capcom / NDS
- **Final Fantasy V** Square Enix / GBA
- **Final Fantasy XI: TAU** Square Enix / Xbox 360
- **Shadam Crusader** Sega / Mega Drive



Eric Patterson

- **World of Warcraft** Blizzard / Mac
- **Clubhouse Games** Nintendo / NDS
- **Loco Roco** SCEA / PSP
- **Gitaroo Man Lives!** Koei / PSP
- **Jet Set Radio Future** Sega / Xbox

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E-E 10+
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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NINTENDO DS
MAGICAL STARSIGN
E

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System(s)	360/PS3	**Publisher**	Sega	**Available**	November
Developer	Sega Studios Japan	**Online/Multi**	NA	**ESRB Rating**	E 10+

SONIC

The Hedgehog

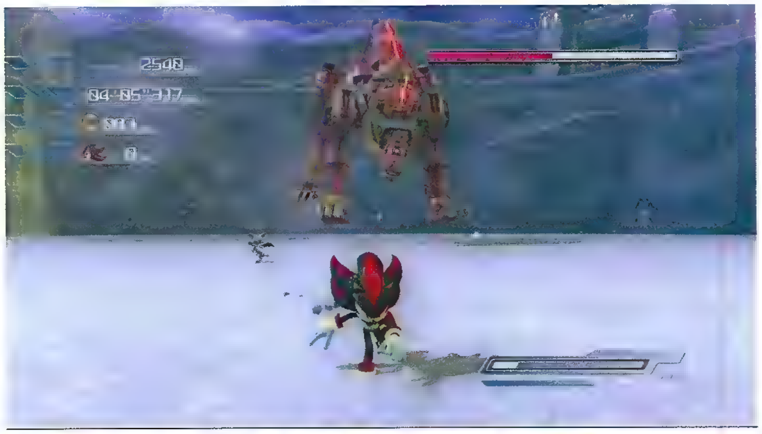
Taste the colors of the rainbow

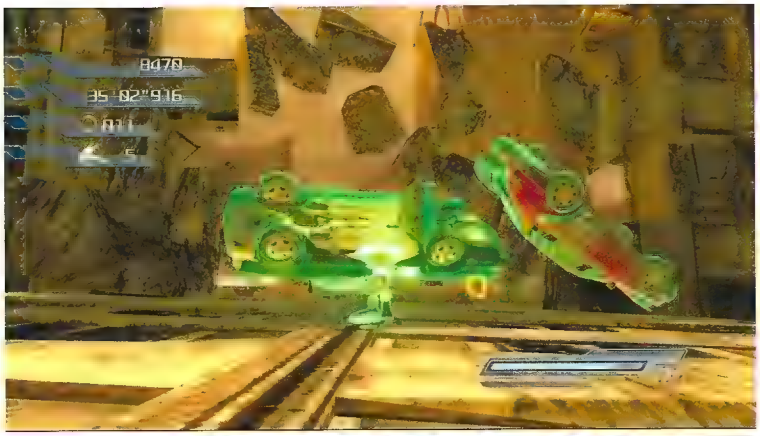
[illegible] **Dave Halverson**

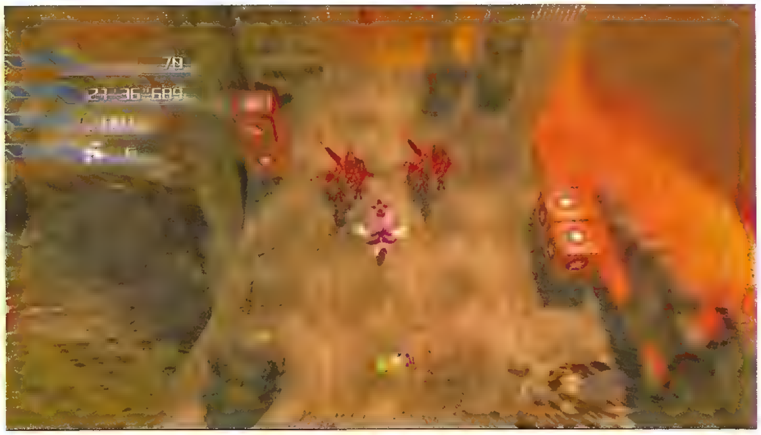
Producer: [illegible] Kumone
Creative Director: Shun [illegible]
Chief Programmers: Yoshitaka [illegible]
Chief Artist: Akira M[illegible]

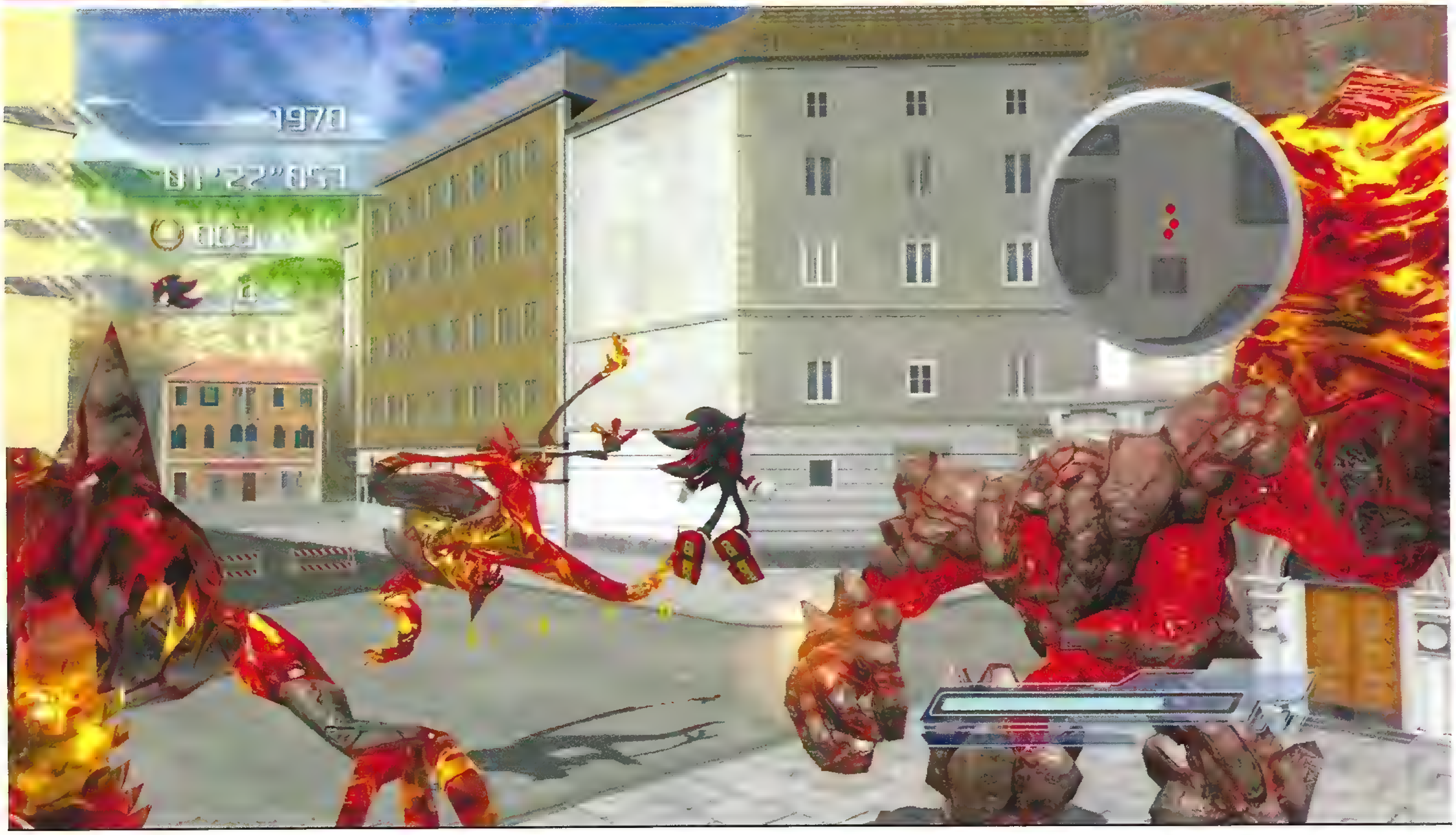
kingdom, a store, and pedestrians that dole out missions to further the story. We're not in Central City anymore.

The game opens amid the Kingdom of Soleanna's annual festival as Princess Elise prepares to ignite the flame of hope and prosperity. As the ceremony commences, she's interrupted by a disturbing premonition of a brutal attack. Not your typical candy-coated Robotnik attack; but more of the fire and brimstone variety. As she ignites the elaborate flaming altar amidst the glimmering lights of the bay, her vision materializes overhead as an armada fills the sky releasing legions of robotic warriors and molten beasts. Who is this new villain I wondered, and since when did Sonic get so calamitous? 'Chaos' (Sonic Adventure) was pretty nasty but there was no human element to speak of. This was an all out attack. And then there he was....Dr. Eggman? Or should I say the new Dr. Eggman. Taller, leaner, and loads more diabolical: don't expect to chase him around spin-dashing a hovering tea cup. Without divulging the crux of the object in question, Sonic shows up looking badder than ever, not to mention voiced well, and the stage is set. You're a few minutes from entering a level—Soleanna beckons, and two things are made eminently clear; you're embarking on a talk-to-everybody variety of action-RPG and moves aren't





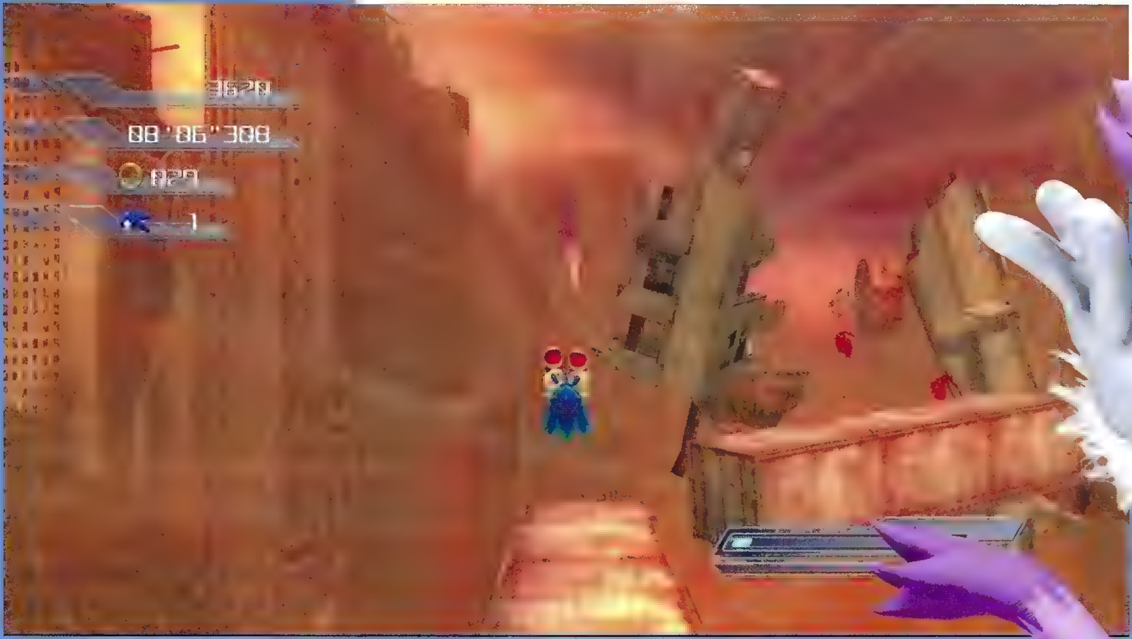




> ***"Or should I say the new Dr. Eggman. Taller, leaner, and loads more diabolical: don't expect to chase him around spin-dashing a hovering tea cup."***

free. Sonic the Hedgehog has a shop!

The levels themselves, marked by holographic portals, are scattered throughout Soleanna and its surrounding areas, opening up as the game progresses. Talking to civilians to satisfy certain conditions gains you access. Nothing taxing or encumbering, but more or less exercises to sharpen your skills for the many roads ahead which leads me to what I absolutely adore about this game. Sonic the Hedgehog is actually a misleading title because this isn't really Sonic's game. It should be called Sonic Universe. I love Sonic, and his speed levels and flatland battles are the by far the best they've ever been.... New moves, tighter control, evolving play mechanics...he's at his best, doing what he did back in 1991; making every other varmint look dated, but now he's sharing the spotlight. The real star of this show is Silver. More than anything, what the Sonic franchise needed was to slow down. So many previous 3D Sonics feel like they're on autopilot, and then when you do get into some platforming Sonic isn't right for the job. In StH once Sonic defeats the first boss-—and the bosses in this game aren't Robotnik but full-blown arena battles versus gigantic behemoths—Silver's plight becomes selectable along with a story twist that will have you at the edge of your seat. Silver's game isn't about speed at all. His power is telekinesis; the ability to levitate objects (cars, massive chunks of buildings and so on) to hurl at his enemies from afar or create platforms. He can also manipulate steel, converting massive steel beams into launching pads. Working with Blaze who also gets into the action with her tornado attacks,



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2

One of the coolest platforming bits in the game is the eye of a tornado

Blaze

Silvers confidant; Firey tornado to the rescue...

Knuckles

Silver

Adding a new, much needed dimension to the Sonic universe

Silver is my dream hedgehog. His jungle assault had me calling friends. Silver's equally substantial role in the game brings an entirely fresh perspective to the gameplay with moves and pacing that are entirely new to the Sonic experience. And once they defeat their prime objective, Iblis—the most impressive boss I've fought all year—it's Shadow and Rouge's turn to weave their way into the story for even more oven-fresh gameplay. This is the Shadow that Sonic fans have yearned for since he burst onto the scene. Remember that abysmal brick of a jeep that maneuvered like a Hummer with skateboard wheels? Check into recall and have that thing wiped from your memory. His new vehicles would make Batman fire his mechanic. The way the story integrates time travel there are moments when playing as Sonic you'll actually overhear conversations you had prior with Silver and Blaze, who blame Sonic for the sorry state that their world is in. It's a real story.

For the environments themselves; beach, snow, post-apocalyptic cities, caverns, tombs, fortresses, desert, jungle, mountains… Sonic Team have piled on layer upon layer of fine detail, breakaway elements and real time erosion, but have done so without making the world look like shiny plastic. Normal-mapping is used to great effect where it's apropos but otherwise the emphasis is on plausible structure. The game is absolutely stunning to behold. And as for the character designs…I want toys.

> "Silver's equally substantial role in the game brings an entirely fresh perspective to the gameplay..."

Sonic the Hedgehog literally has everything: platforming—some of it amid situations you simply will not believe—high-speed chases, close quarters combat, multiple vehicles, flying, speed zones, character customization, real time cinemas (skillfully acted—this is Sega's best localization to date), beautiful CG, telekinesis, RPG elements, open-world exploration, rail-grinding, rampant diversity, epic bosses, a fantastic soundtrack, a beautiful princess to save—you actually spend a level carrying her—and next-gen visuals that make you happy to be alive. You simply can't ask for more out of an action game. Mission accomplished. Sonic is born anew. **play**

Sonic the Hedgehog

score 9.5

+	The best Sonic ever, hands down, 2D or otherwise.
-	Still just a few little bugs...but ant sized.

7900
10'30"275
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2/2

3060
09'23"506
054
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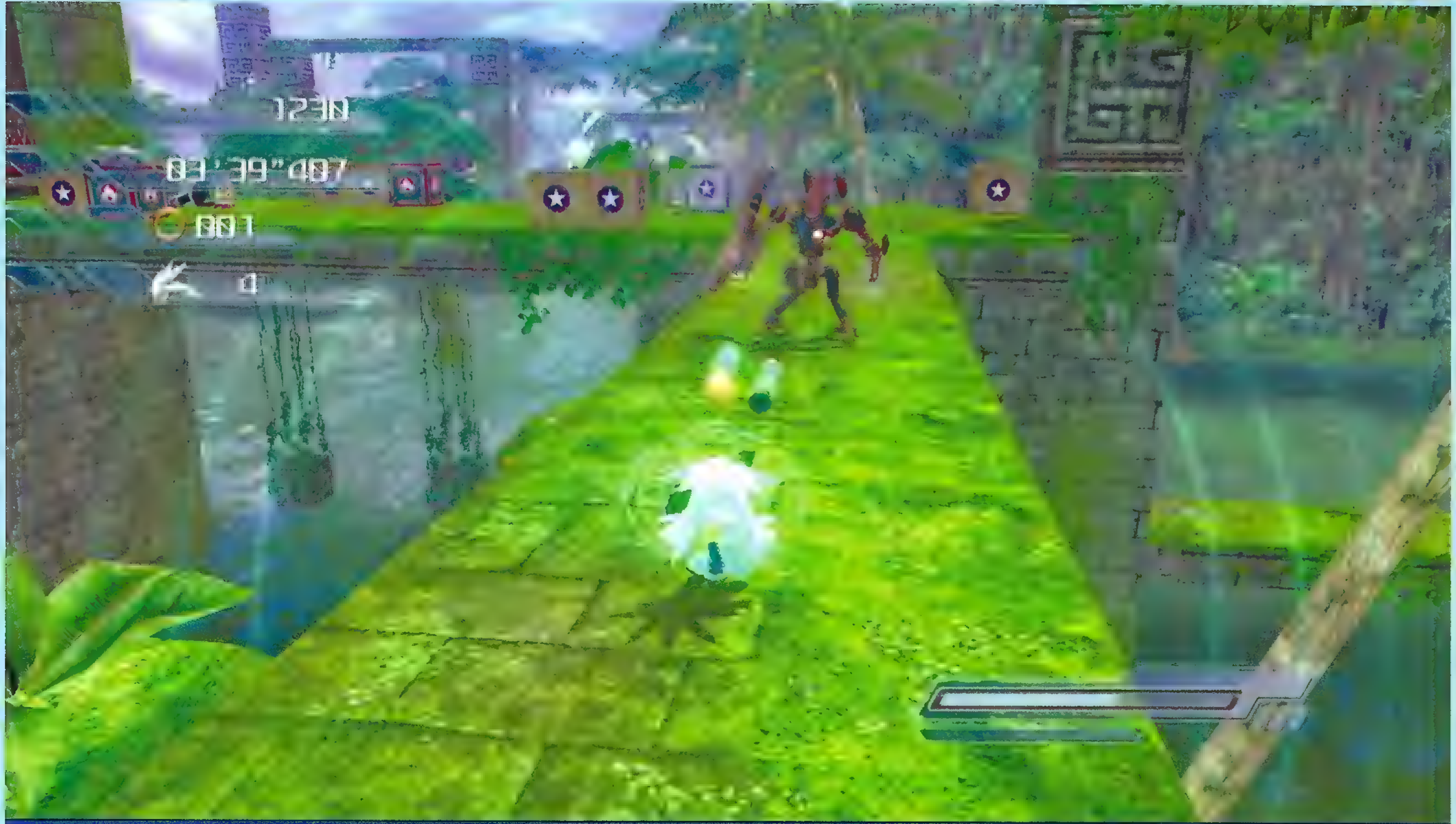
Elise

The fair princess of Soleanna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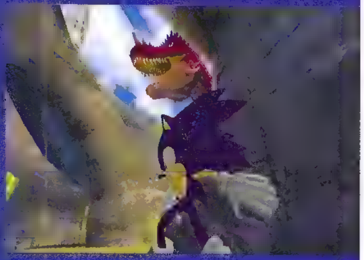
Silver can deflect incoming missiles and send them hurling back.

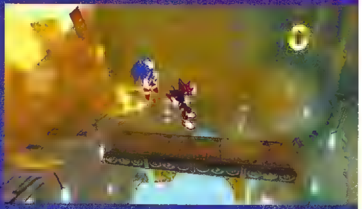
More Sonic to come

Sonic and the Secret Rings
Nintendo Wii
Sega Studios Japan
Spring 2007

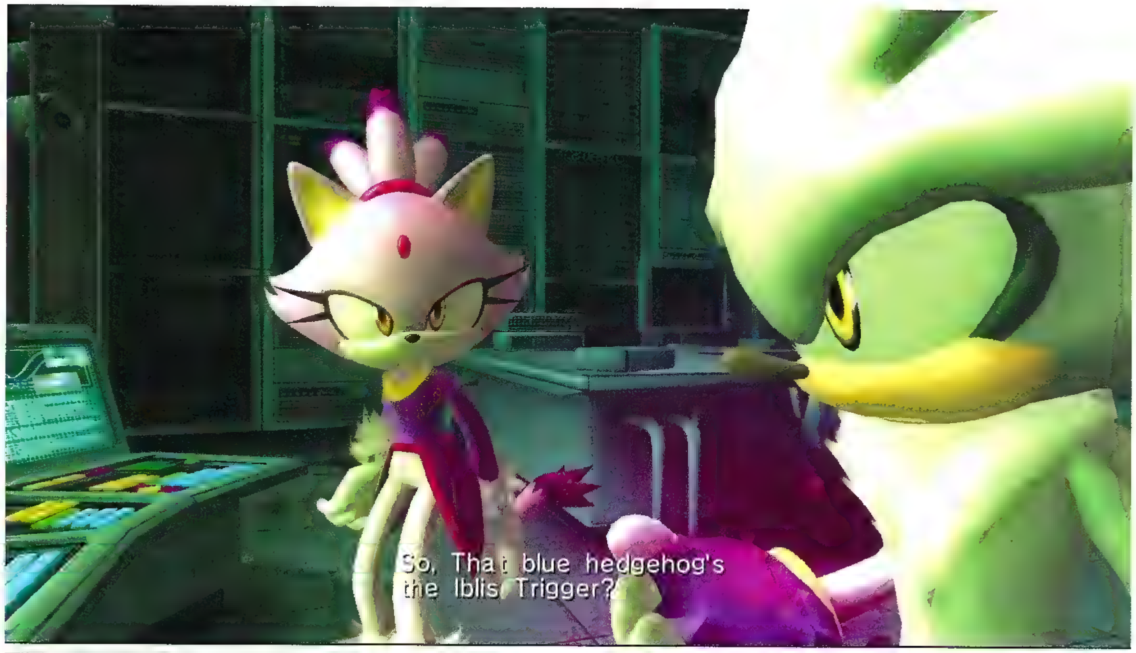
Sonic meets Arabian Nights in his first Wii exclusive where he's sucked into the classic book by a genie to retrieve several pages that have gone blank, to set the world of the Arabian Nights back in order. The game is Wii-lly (okay, I coined that) fun as you hurtle Sonic forward by rotating the controller from side to side and perform combo moves with a flick of the wrist.

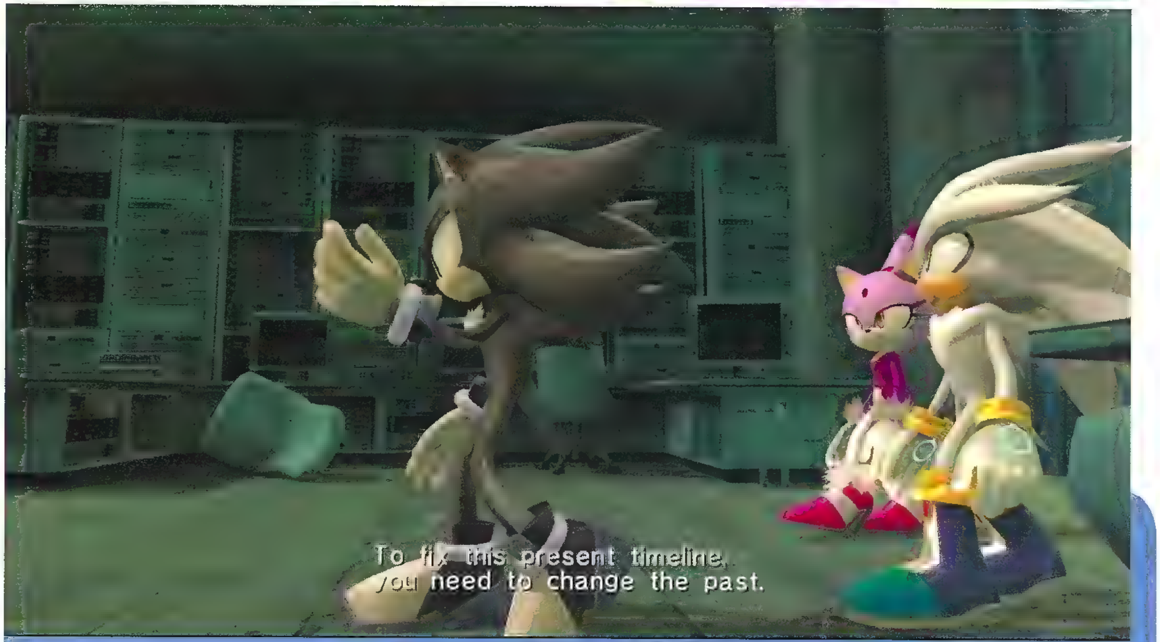


Sonic Rivals
PSP
Backbone Ent.
Fall 2006



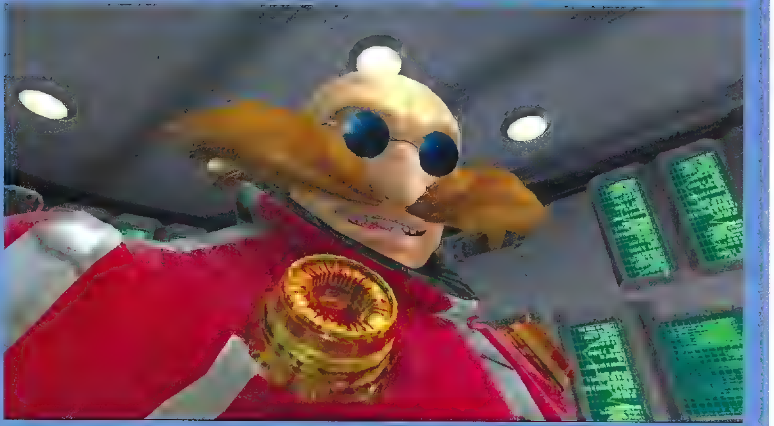
In Sonic rivals classic 2D Sonic style gameplay takes on a new twist when a friendly competition between Sonic and Knuckles escalates into a full on PSP racing game! Boost, trip, shove, and vault while avoiding hazardous traps and hazards, and watch out for the insidious Dr. Eggman and his contraptions. Vs. the CPU or a rival, Dashin' Desperados type gameplay has finally made it's way to 3D!





Epilogue

All that's left for Sega now is to make sure Golden Axe follows suit and to announce NiGHTS 2. They do that and Scott Steinberg becomes the new Peter Moore Sega fans have been waiting for since we lost our beloved Dreamcast. Think about it. Condemned, Full Auto, Golden Axe, Sonic, and NiGHTS...They'll be a 3D Shinobi away from a return to the glory days, and there's no better time than the present with so many great platforms to choose from. While they're at it, Astal, and Clockwork Knight 1 & 2 need to be ported immediately to the PSP. I can never leave well enough alone, and when it comes to Sega, I never will. The End.



The new Dr. Eggman finally grew a pair.

NBA 2K7
Heavenly Sword
Full Auto 2: Battlelines
Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom
Tiger Woods PGA TOUR 07
Warhawk
Tony Hawk's Project 8
Madden NFL 07
MotorStorm™
Lair
Resistance: Fall of Man™
F.E.A.R.

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Video output in HD requires cables and an HD-compatible display, both sold separately. Copy-protected Blu-ray video discs can only output at 1080p using an HDMI cable connected to a device that is compatible with the HDCP standard. HDMI cable not included. Additional equipment may be required to use the HDMI connector. Cell Broadband Engine,™ "PlayStation" and the "PS" Family logo are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Play B3yond is a trademark of Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc. All names, brands and associated imagery featured are trademarks and/or copyrighted materials of their respective owners. The NBA and individual NBA member team identifications reproduced on this product are trademarks and copyrighted designs, and/or other forms of intellectual property, that are the exclusive property of NBA Properties, Inc., and the respective NBA member teams and may not be used, in whole or in part, without the prior written consent of NBA Properties, Inc. ©2006 NBA Properties, Inc. All rights reserved.

PRODUCTS RANGE FROM EVERYONE TO MATURE
E-M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Genji: Days of the Blade
Call of Duty 3
TNT
NBA 07
Ridge Racer 7
Mobile Suit Gundam: CROSSFIRE
Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Vegas
Marvel Ultimate Alliance
PLAYSTATION 3

System(s) Playstation 2
Developer SEGA Studios Japan
Publisher Sega
Available Spring 2007

Shining Force EXA

May this series shine forever

words **Heather Campbell**

This spring, all of the next-generation consoles will be available in stores. Assuming Sony has overcome its shipping shortages, one will be able to walk into any Wal-mart and pick up a PS3, a 360 or a Wii. We'll be firmly entrenched in super crazy polygon counts and swinging our Wiimotes like tennis rackets. We'll be using micro-transactions to unlock new playable tracks, and we'll be stepping up to the future with diminishing anxiety.

But don't count out your last-gen system just yet. Playstation 2 has some power left in it, and it's going to go out in style. Sega's prepared to do whatever it takes to make sure the PS2's swan song is not just a tepid murmur. Instead, it's going to be the bleating scream of a duck hopped up on fowl steroids. Sure, it'll be months since we've been deafened by the roar of Christmas releases, but Shining Force EXA may be the title that makes you dust off your PS2 just as the flowers are starting to bloom.

Or you can always just drop the disk in your compatible PS3.

An RPG with hacking, slashing, stabbing action, Shining Force EXA promises to retain the classic sense of adventure that the series is famous for. You're not just limited to one hero, either. Players can seek fame and loot as either Toma (young boy with trusty sword in hand) or Cyrille (female, which means she's probably going to cast magic).

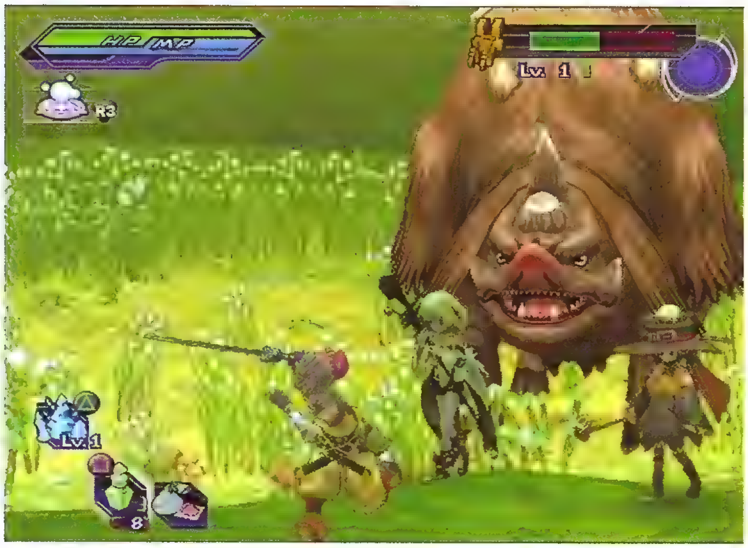
What's more is that Shining Force EXA features a "Fortress System," or a home base that players build up weaponry and tactics to help give gamers the edge against a fantastic threat. A secondary game within the world of EXA, the Fortress System gives players five choices for fighting: Basic Mode, Bombardment, Recovery, Enemy Scouting, and Absolute Defense.

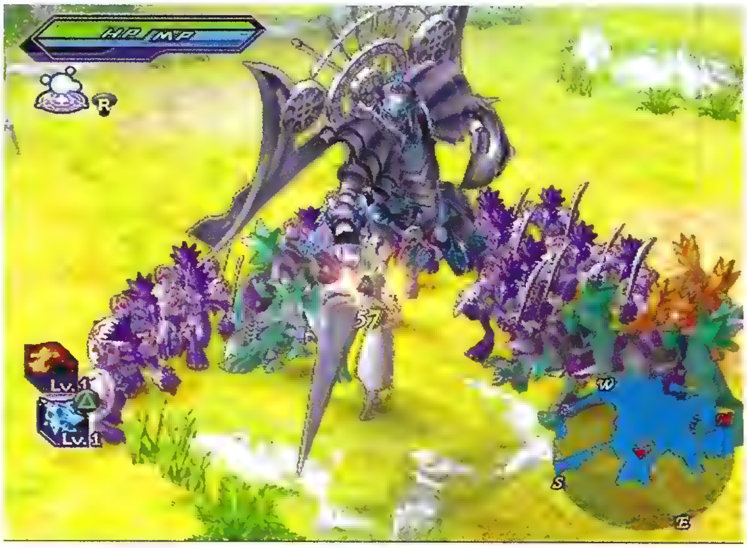
Being so very late in the PS2's lifespan, the game has really splendid graphics, and the design of the title puts some next-gen software to shame. There may be more polygons being pushed out of the systems next season, but Sega knows how to use what they have. The character animation is slick and fluid, and chances are some gamers are simply going to choose Shining Force over the first wave of PS3 games because of the superior execution of the second Playstation's limited abilities. If the game looks and plays great, who cares if it's Sixaxis compatible?

Fans of the series won't be disappointed, and newcomers have one last chance to see what makes Shining Force so special before the games head to the inevitable next-generation systems. With adaptable party members, deeper tactics, and a new AI system, EXA is going to deliver one last shining blow to PS2 before the system slinks into history. **play**

> "Sega's prepared to do whatever it takes to make sure the PS2's swan song is not just a tepid murmur..."

Someone's about to stick that lance where the sun don't shine...





EVERYONE
E
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Mild Cartoon Violence
Comic Mischief

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ump in.

XBOX 360

The Future of Future-Proof Gaming

Sony Shows off the PlayStation 3

words **Greg Orlando**

"We are ready," Kazuo Hirai proclaimed.

Hirai was hearkening back to the launch of the Sony PlayStation game console in 1995. "When we launched the PlayStation, our advertising campaign—our tagline—was, 'You are not ready,'" he said. Now, in 2006, the president for Sony Computer Entertainment America left the stage to a wave of applause. He had just finished showing off the PlayStation 3 to roughly 300 journalists in a cramped and poorly air-conditioned San Francisco soundstage, and one thing was hammered home after more than an hour-and-a-half of presentations.

Sony was, in fact, ready.

Few in attendance at Sony's gamer's day press event, held roughly one month before the PlayStation 3's November 17 launch, expected blockbuster announcements about the console. None were forthcoming. Instead, Hirai and cohorts fleshed out the details on the PlayStation 3 console, its packaging, peripherals, launch titles, and online network. "What we hope to do is wrap everything up into a nice, neat package, answering all the questions that you have had for the past three years," Hirai said, "and perhaps even giving you answers to questions you didn't even know you had about PlayStation 3."

If only they could produce enough for us all.

With PlayStation 3, Hirai said Sony intends to lay the foundation for the next 10 years of digital entertainment. "As a leader in video game entertainment," he said, "we felt it was our responsibility to build a machine featuring the most advanced technology. What we have brought together for PlayStation 3 is an entertainment system that we can truly call future-proof: gaming that is going to be relevant to consumers and supported by game developers one-, two-, five-, even 10 years into the future."

The PlayStation 3's final specifications are impressive indeed, and Jack Tretton, executive Vice President and co–chief operating officer for Sony Computer Entertainment America noted there are only three specific differences between the console's $599, high-end model and its less costly model, which clocks in at $499. The $599 version features a 60-gigabyte hard drive to its counterpart's 20 gigabytes. In addition, it features wireless connectivity, and ports for Sony's Memory Sticks as well as for SD- and CompactFlash cards, where the lower-end PlayStation 3 does not.

"One of the things that stands out almost instantly, is these are two fully featured devices. We do not have a stripped-down core model," Tretton said, referencing the Xbox 360, which launched with two separate versions, the cheaper of which does not include a hard drive. "We offer everything that the consumer is going to need regardless of whether they go for the $499- or the $599 [model]."

Both PlayStation 3 versions come with a motion-sensing wireless controller Sony has dubbed Sixaxis. The Sixaxis looks remarkably similar to the PlayStation 2's DualShock 2 controller, but has been altered in some substantial ways. The rumble feedback features of the Dual Shock have been removed, and replaced with motion sensors tracking the controller's alignment. In addition, Sixaxis' L2 and R2 buttons have been reshaped to make them more like triggers, and its analog sticks feature a greater range of movement. Sixaxis can operate wirelessly for 20 hours, and recharges

SIXAXIS It's the pad we've all come to know and love only now it's hardwired to our every move. Better than Nintendo's Nunchuk? We'll soon find out.

Cro-Magnon man worshipped it; now it can be yours.

> "...the PlayStation 3's processing unit is 40 times faster than that of the PlayStation 2."

its batteries when plugged into a cable that then connects to the PlayStation 3.

PlayStation 3s will also be packaged with an AC cord, as well as USB mini-, Ethernet, and multi-AV cables. Tretton said the PlayStation 3 will eschew the Xbox 360's external, brick-like power source, and promised the console runs at a quiet 22 decibels.

The Cell Broadband Engine, the PlayStation 3's processing unit, is 40 times faster than that of the PlayStation 2, Tretton said. "[It has] 236 microprocessors," he said of the Cell, which will make its consumer debut with the PlayStation 3. "Also, it is processing at up to 256,000,000 teraflops per second. What does that mean? I have no idea—[Sony President, Worldwide Studios] Phil Harrison could tell you, but I know that it means the development community does not have to sacrifice anything."

Some had questioned Sony's use of Blu-Ray drives, citing the company's lack of success with its proprietary technology such as Minidisc and Betamax. Tretton sought to allay fears Blu-Ray would suffer a similar fate, saying 170 consumer electronic companies including Apple, Dell, Hewlett-Packard, JVC, Mitsubishi, and Hitachi will be utilizing the technology, as will seven of the eight major film studios. He noted the discs' 50-gigabytes of memory capacity will be great for game developers and told the audience that in addition to Blu-Ray titles, the PlayStation 3 drive also plays CDs and DVDs.

As a way to introduce people to Blu-Ray, Tretton said the first 500,000 PlayStation 3s sold will come with a copy of the Will Ferrell comedy Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby. The film, he said, won't be available anywhere else until December 12.

Sony also showed off the PlayStation 3's interface, with attendees being walked through its features by Harrison. Not surprisingly, the interface is very similar to that found in Sony's TVs and in its handheld console the PSP. The interface allows people to store photos, and to create "virtual" pictures complete with borders and dates as if they were real photographs stored in a physical album. Music can be ripped and played within the interface, and the PlayStation 3 features impressive video options as well. Video thumbnails of stored movies, for example, all run in real-time.

A new remote play feature lets users wirelessly share files between WiFi-enabled PlayStation 3s and PSPs. In this way, it will be possible to download games to the PlayStation 3 and transfer them to PSP. The two devices can also share photos and videos, and Sony punctuated this demonstration by showing a video on the PlayStation 3, pausing it, transferring it over to a PSP, and then resuming it on the handheld.

Harrison said PlayStation 3 will come with a free Web browser. When it came time to demonstrate the PlayStation 3's Internet capabilities, he called up a YouTube.com clip of Hirai at May's Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3)—the now notorious one where Sony's president says "Rrrrrrrriiiiiddddggggeeeee Rrrrraaaaaccccceerrrr!" —and pointed out that it was possible to have multiple browser windows open without causing the video to stop, or even slow its playback. Internet navigation, Harrison said, can also be done with the aid of a USB keyboard, allowing people to type in Web addresses and the like.

An Xbox Live 360-esque friends list will also be included in the interface. Here, users will be to see when their friends come online, and can also send messages to one another. Sony's online store, which offers game demos, videos, and other downloadable content, can be accessed through the interface, and Sony has opted to use real currency instead of points. Items can be purchased with credit cards or by redeeming gift cards.

Initially, Harrison said, all content featured on the online store will cost $14.99 or less. At launch, he said, players will have access to game demos for MotorStorm plus four or so other titles, as well as complete titles such as Blast Factor, a colorful shoot-'em-up reminiscent of Xbox Live 360s Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved. Downloaded content, Harrison said, can

PS3

Inital game line-up

Call of Duty 3

Publisher	Activision	**Available**	Launch

be accessed on up to five PlayStation 3s. Further, he said, store options won't be the only place users will be able to buy content. Sony is allowing content to be sold directly from within a game.

The last, but not the least, part of the puzzle came in the form of games. Hirai heralded 22 first- and third-party titles for PlayStation 3 from its launch to the holiday season: Genji: Days of the Blade, NBA 07, Resistance: Fall of Man, Fight Night Round 3, Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII, Call of Duty 3, Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, F.E.A.R., Full Auto 2: Battlelines, Madden NFL 07, Marvel Ultimate Alliance, Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire, NBA 2K7, NBA Live 07, Need For Speed: Carbon, NHL 2K7, Sonic the Hedgehog, Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07, Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas, Tony Hawk's Project 8, Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom, and Ridge Racer 7.

"This is the most robust lineup of any console launch," he said.

First-party titles such as NBA 07, the dark and gritty first-person shooter Resistance: Fall of Man, and the third-person dragon-based combat game Lair were demonstrated in front of the audience. Sony also showed off two downloadable titles in Blast Factor and Criminal Crackdown. Factor, Sony claimed, was made with a five-man staff. God of War's designer David Jaffe came on stage to demonstrate the wacky cel-shaded Crackdown, wherein players can wreck game environments, capture criminals, and then drive them to jail.

More games awaited attendees, as Sony had set aside two whole floors of the San Francisco venue for hands-on play for both first- and third-party PlayStation 3 titles such as Resistance, Lair, MotorStorm, Virtua Tennis, Virtua Fighter 5, Hot Shots Golf 5, Ridge Racer 7, Fight Night Round 3, Call of Duty 3, Marvel Ultimate Alliance, and Sonic the Hedgehog.

As the evening wore on, it came as no surprise that Sony had to pull people away from the games, dragging them downstairs so rapper Ludacris, the evening's entertainment, could perform a 30-minute set.

Everyone, it seems, was not ready—to stop playing.

Fight Night Round 3

Publisher	EA Sports	**Available**	Launch

Madden NFL 07

Publisher	EA Sports	**Available**	Launch

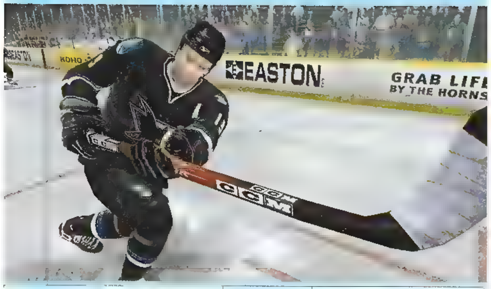
Formula One Championship

Publisher	SCEA	**Available**	TBA

Ridge Racer 7

Publisher	Namco	**Available**	Launch

NHL 2K7


EASTON
GRAB LIFE BY THE HORNS
KOHO
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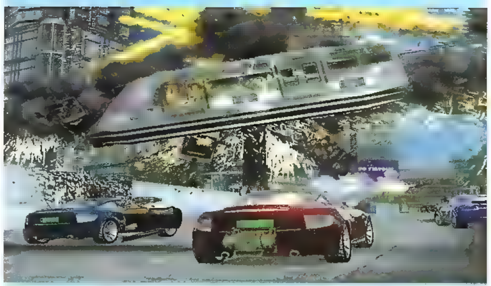
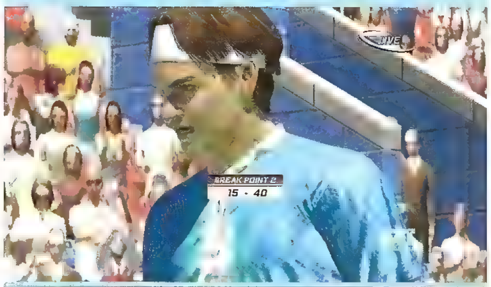
Publisher	2k Sports	**Available**	March

Full Auto 2: Battlelines



Publisher	Sega	**Available**	Launch

Virtua Tennis 3


LIVE
BREAK POINT 2
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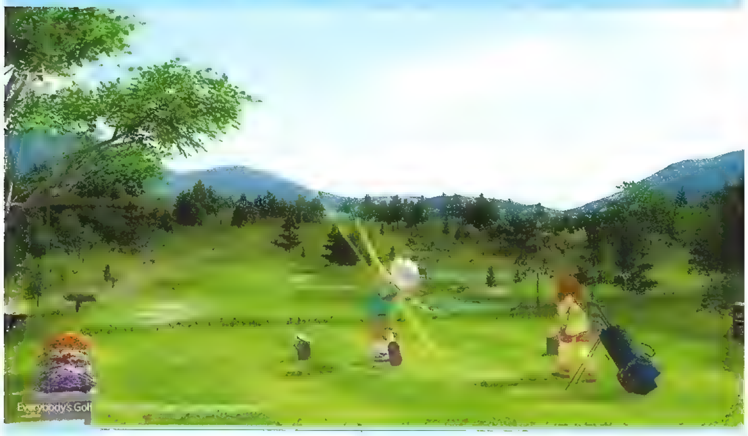
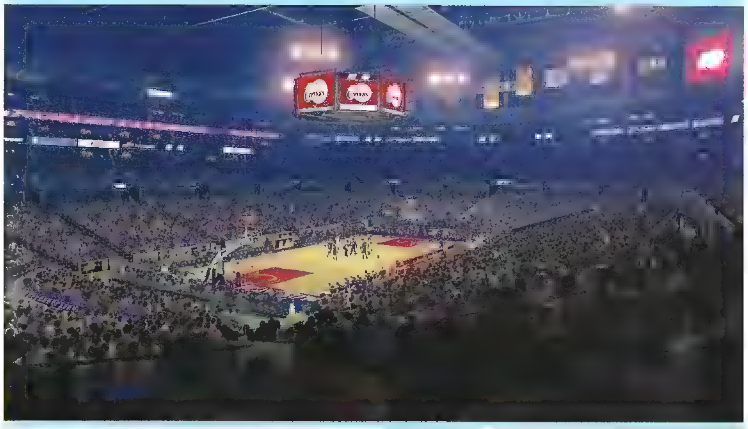
Publisher	Sega-AM2	**Available**	Q2

Hot Shots Golf 5


Everybody's Golf

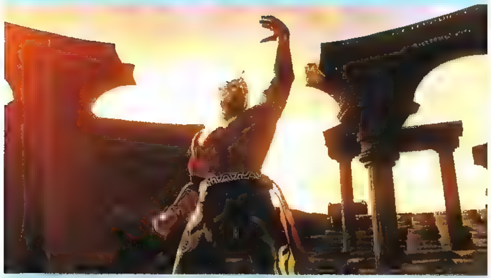
Publisher	SCEA	**Available**	TBA

NBA 2K7



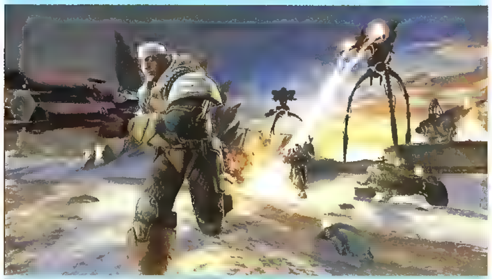
Publisher	2K Sports	**Available**	Launch

Virtua Fighter 5



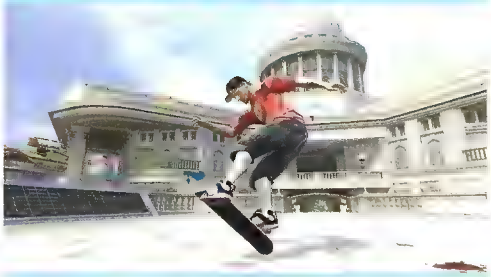
Publisher	Sega	**Available**	Q2

Unreal Tournament 2007



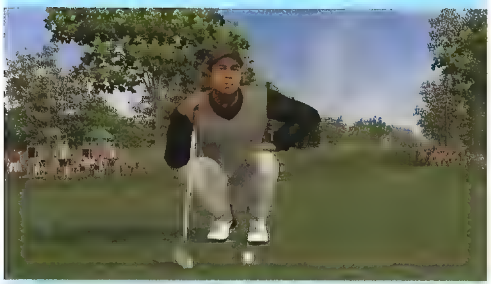
Publisher	Midway	**Available**	TBA

Tony Hawk's Project 8



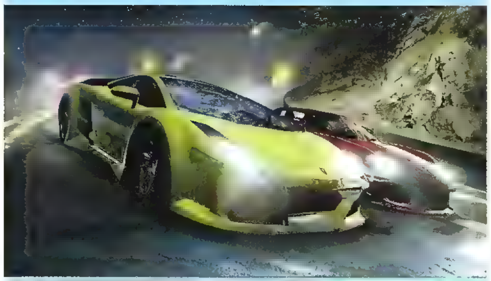
Publisher	Activision	**Available**	Launch

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07



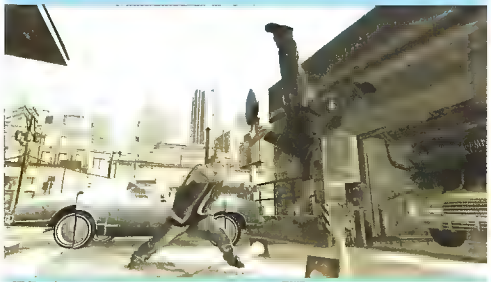
Publisher	EA Sports	**Available**	Launch

Need for Speed Carbon



Publisher	EA Games	**Available**	Launch

Def Jam Icon



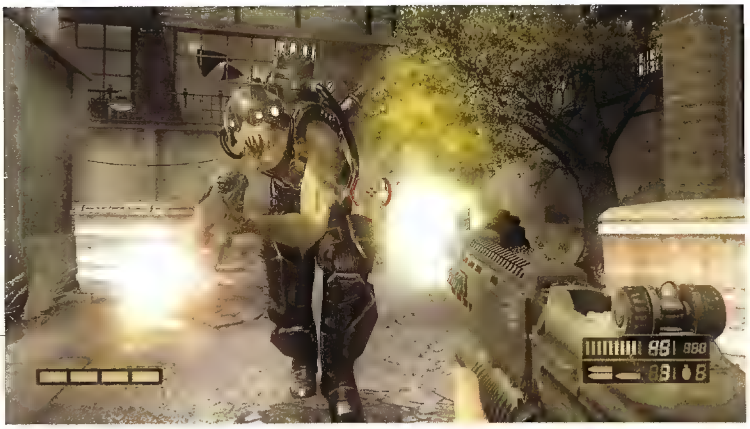
Publisher	EA Games	**Available**	TBA

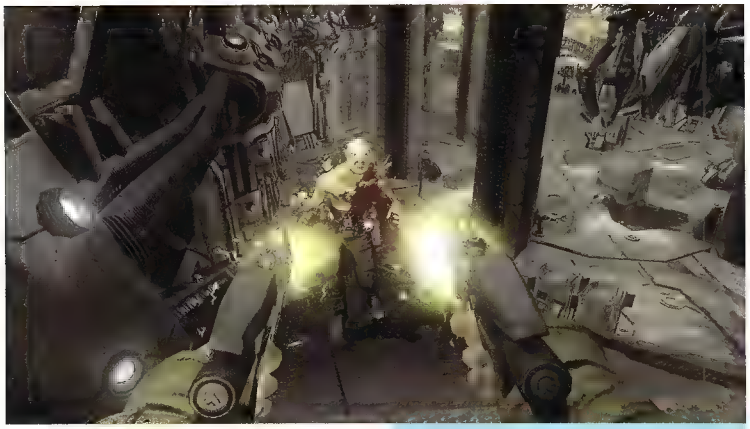
System(s)	PlayStation 3	**Publisher**	Sony
Developer	Insomniac Games	**Available**	Launch

Resistance
Fall of Man

The return of space invaders…

words **Greg Orlando**





[illegible]

Ted Price, founder and president of Insomniac Games, works well in understatement. "What I'm going to show here is Nottingham, England," he says. "This is not the Nottingham you may know."

What appears on screen is certainly not the pastoral Nottingham as popularized by the legends of Robin Hood, nor is it the modern, but somewhat crime-plagued metropolitan center. Instead, it is a yellow-brown hell, an almost desert wasteland dominated by huge metal structures seemingly out of a cyberpunk novel. And those are no merry men thwarting the will of the sheriff, robbing from the rich and giving to the poor. Those are severely beaten-with-the-ugly-stick invaders from outer space.

In Resistance: Fall of Man, the alien chimera have taken over. World War II never happened, and the game begins in England in 1951. American soldier Nathan Hale (it remains to be seen if this Nathan Hale has any relation to the American patriot Nathan Hale who, during the Revolutionary War, told the British, "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country") finds himself infected by a chimera virus, which slowly turns people into more aliens. Lots and lots of first-person shooting ensues.

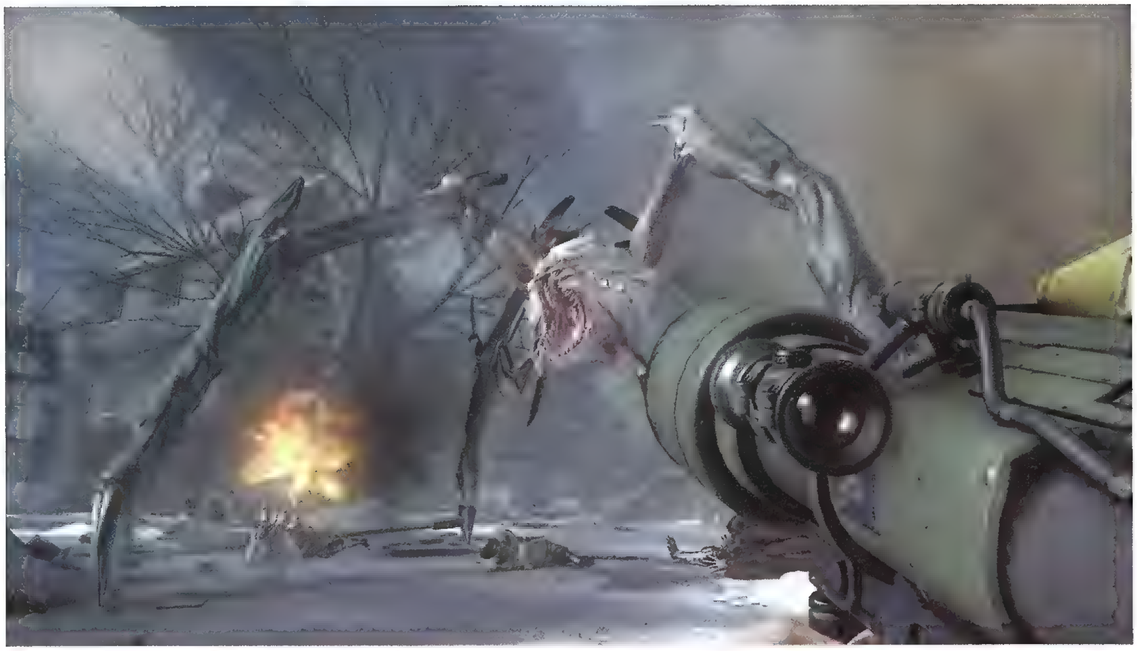
One month before the game's release, Price took the stage at Sony's press day to show off the title, demonstrating its play to approximately 300 journalists. Price began to run down the game's vast array of weaponry, including the Auger, which fires projectiles through objects; and the Bullseye, that can tag an enemy and whose bullets then act as guided missiles, allowing players to take cover behind corners and still kill enemies. "One of my favorites in this arsenal, is our rocket launcher, which we call the Laark," Price said. "This is not your standard rocket launcher because it fires rockets, but can also pause them in mid-air. Using the analog controller, I can actually control the speed at which the projectile travels."

> "…it is a yellow-brown hell, an almost desert wasteland dominated by huge metal structures…"

Another one of Resistance's semi-futuristic weapons Price claims is his favorites is the Hailstorm gun. He says, "Hailstorm fires a massive barrage of bullets that bounce off things, but it can also fire a little turret that will take out enemies at well." Other pieces of cool armament in Resistance include the time-slowing Far Eye sniper rifle, and the dual-wielded Reaper pistols that use the PlayStation 3's L1 and R1 triggers to target two enemies at one time.

In motion, the game is spectacularly beautiful, featuring tons of projectiles being tossed around, as well as chaotic battles involving Hale, his allies, and scores of different chimera types. Neat touches abounded, too, in the Nottingham stage playable at gamer's day: dead enemies whose bodies didn't dissolve after being killed, close-quarters combat where a chimera leapt onto Hale and began biting him (players must defend themselves by shaking the motion-sensitive Sixaxis controller to free him), and slowed time via the Far Eye giving players the opportunity to, say, take out an enemy gun battery before its projectiles killed the protagonist.

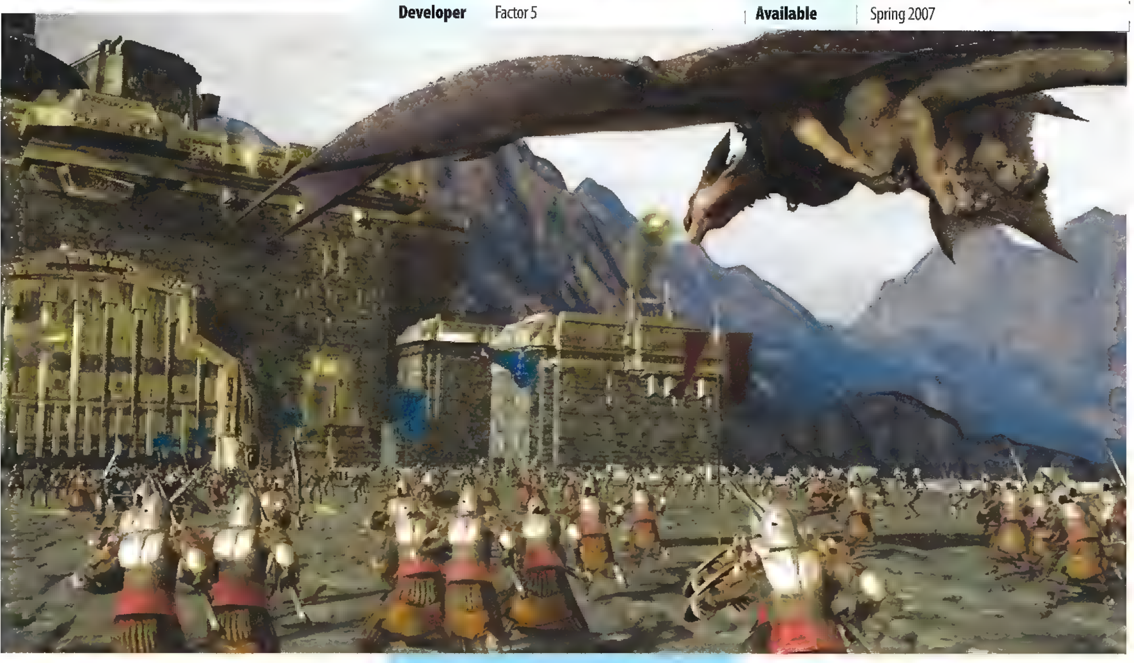
Multiplayer options simply weren't available at gamer's day, but there is good news for a wrecked planet Earth: Resistance will support 40-player online games, making it the most palatable alien invasion mankind may ever see.



System(s)	PlayStation 3	**Publisher**	Sony
Developer	Factor 5	**Available**	Spring 2007

Lair

words **Greg Orlando**



Gentle Puff the magic dragon would be terribly out of place in the tooth-and-claw laden Lair. In fact, it's safe to say that his friend little Jackie Paper would need years upon years of therapy after watching Puff bitten, stabbed, or flamed out of the sky.

The unfriendly skies await in the PlayStation 3-exclusive Lair, and there's no more violent or ridiculously dangerous way to fly them than on the leathery, scaled back of a huge dragon. Players take the role of a pilot in a dragon air force, asked to participate in epic ground- and air-based conflicts.

Developer Factor 5 wants players to know they won't be required to win wars by themselves, but will play an integral part in each fight. Battles require pilots to soar through the air, hunting down targets and locking on to them with the PlayStation 3's Sixaxis controller's L1 and R1 triggers. From there, players will able to flame their enemies, use bashing attacks where dragons slam their bodies into targets, and ultimately close to melee range. In melee range, combatants can claw, flame, and bite one another, with the Sixaxis' face buttons determining the various attacks. Pilot-to-pilot combat takes place when one rider uses a grappling hook to attach to an enemy dragon, leaping onto its back. If the enemy rider is dispatched, a quick stab through the junction between a dragon's neck and back will kill it.

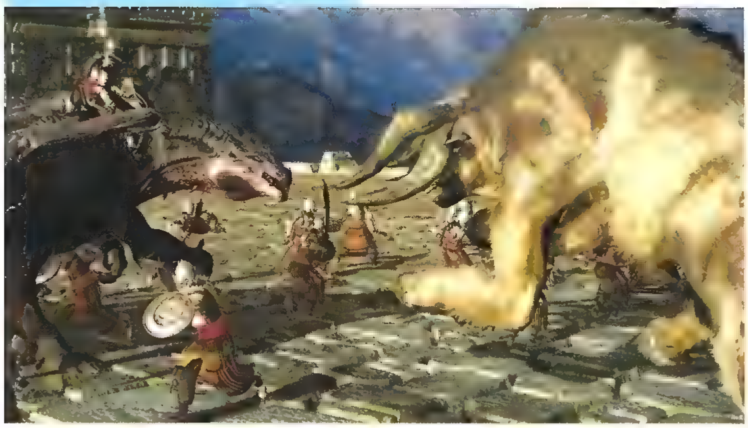
A pilot can also land his dragon on the ground, and tear into the forces fighting there. Transition from air to ground is seamless, and once a dragon has landed, it can use its various attacks to wreck whole battalions with stomp attacks and flames. Using its talons, a dragon can also grab individual soldiers and eat them, thus restoring a portion of its health. As the dragon and its rider perform their duties, the game tracks a battle's momentum with a meter at the top of the screen. Successful attacks won't win the war, but will help turn the tide, or keep the momentum slanted in favor of the player's forces.

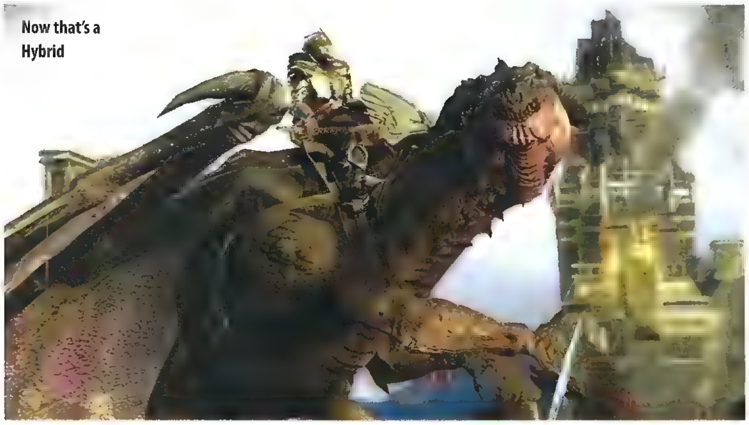
Lair eschews traditional flight-based game controls, letting players fly their dragons by moving the Sixaxis and not its analog sticks. Subtle movements to the left or to the right bank the dragon in the appropriate direction. Dropping the controller down executes a dive and tilting it up performs a climb. Bash attacks are made after quick jerks of a controller toward an enemy beast. Button presses control the game's other attacks, as well as flight commands such as speed bursts and hovering.

"…dragons slam their bodies into targets, and ultimately close to melee range."

Visually impressive, Lair features turbulent, smoky skies with oppressive clouds and muted colors to give the game a stark and martial feel. At Sony's recent gamer's day, held to promote the impending launch for the PlayStation 3, Lair certainly was in contention for the best-looking title there.

The dragon's age begins this spring. It will be hot, and it will be fiery. Bring marshmallows.





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System(s)	Xbox 360, PC	Publisher	Bethesda Softworks
[illegible]	Mad Doc Software	Available	November 7

STAR TREK LEGACY

[illegible]

words **Heather Campbell**

Wow. Star Trek has been around for forty years. You know, I can remember the twenty-fifth anniversary of Trek pretty clearly. I was in junior high, and I watched Star Trek: Next Generation every week. I read Trek novels and bought a couple collector's magazines.

Then my classmates made fun of me until I didn't watch the show anymore.

In the early 90's, it was kinda cool to like Trek. Before Deep Space Nine and Voyager and Enterprise and the whole geek-chic movement came and went, before Firefly and the Star Wars prequels—if there was ever a time to like Star Trek, it was when Picard was captain, and grunge was sneaking out of Seattle.

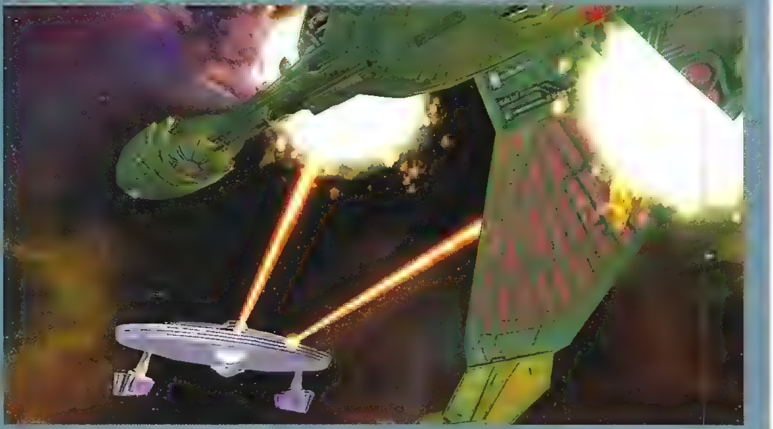
It's 2006, fifteen years later. Forty years of Star Trek. The original series is getting an High Definition makeover, and J.J. Abrams (guru of Lost and Alias) is directing the next movie. It seems like a good time to like Trek again. And Star Trek: Legacy affirms this. It's the first Star Trek game I've ever wanted to play.

Mad Doc Software has designed an epic space-battle game with Legacy, featuring every ship from every episode, every film. Read that again. Every ship. That's insane! Add to that an original story by D.C. Fontana (screenwriter from the original series onward), and the voices of every captain to ever boldly go, and you've got the first Star Trek game that really feels like an event.

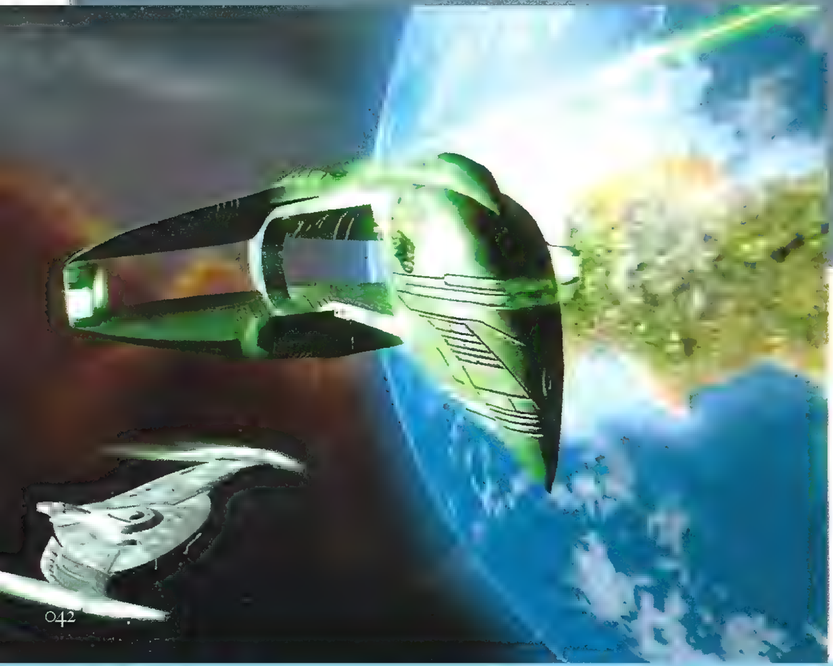
Playing the game is immediately intuitive. You take on the role of a Starfleet Admiral (or any of four Trek races) and command a fleet of ships through space. You can switch between ships to personally control the battles, or send out your fleet with instructions. Smaller ships respond quickly, larger ships deal out more damage. You can tailor your experience to your own play style. The game has incredible detail. Fleets appear more as actual models and less like CG counterparts. The sound effects and solid score pull you right into the shows.

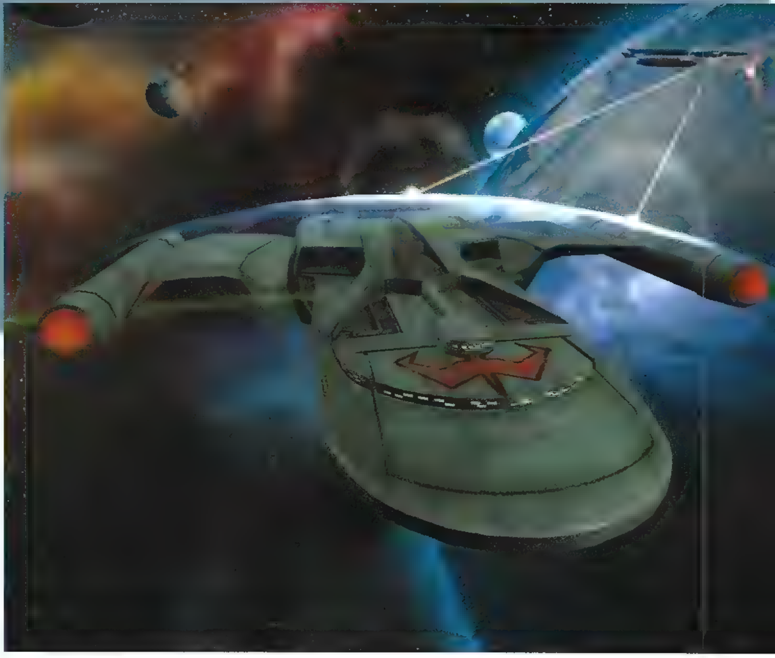
But really, it's all about driving the Enterprise around in space. Any Enterprise. Old or new. Or a Klingon Bird of Prey. Or a Borg cube ship. You can fight it out against other Live players, or take on the single-person story that spans three generations of Trek. I've got to admit, I'm psyched. And this time, there's no one to make fun of me. **play**

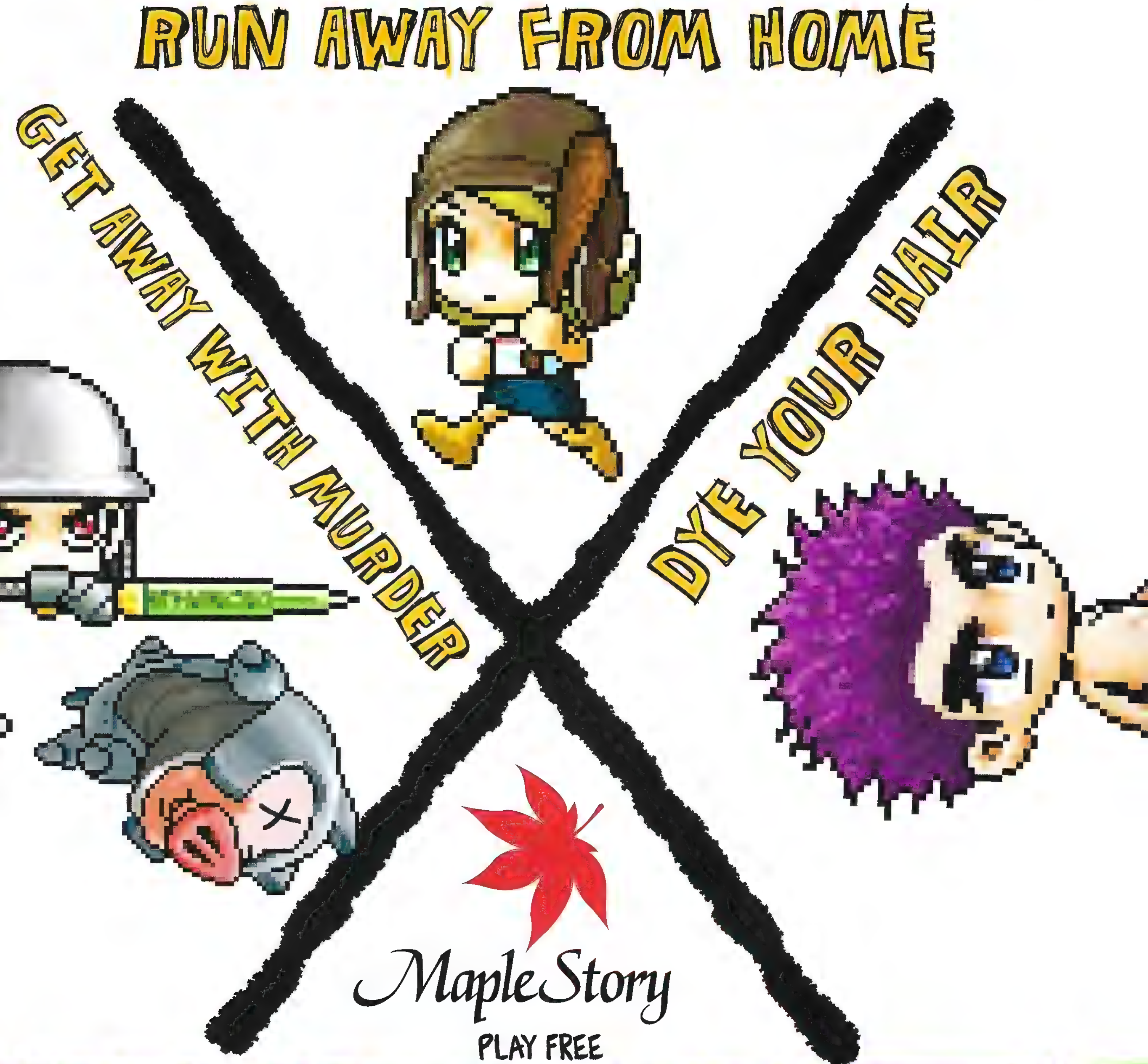
"You can tailor your experience to your own play style. The game has incredible detail."



I love the smell of photon blasts in the morning



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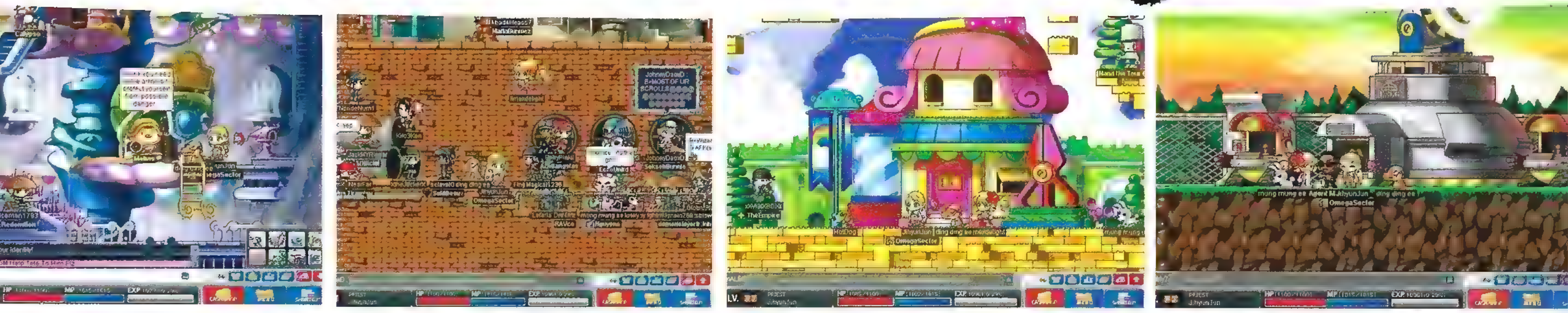

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gaming. Are the same designers working on Circle of Doom?**
Yes but since Circle of Doom requires more varieties in character and environment designs, we needed more numbers of artists on top of the former members.

What are you able to do in terms of mountable beasts? Just horses or will you expand into more mythical beasts?
Circle of Doom is more like a run & gun type of game without riding anything. However, the RTS sequel will definitely have more mountable beasts than just horses.

Are you using normal-mapping extensively? How detailed will the characters be? Are you working with layers of armor, cloth effects and so forth?
We use techniques that most next-gen games use such as specular-mapping, normal-mapping, IBL, real-time shadow, real-time volume light etc.

How many characters this time? Do all of the quests cover similar ground?
There will be a total of 6 main heroes appearing in Circle of Doom and one of them will be female, Celine. Other than her, 3 more (NPC) will serve as an important link to the storyline. Plus, Circle of Doom will default to online cooperative mode but players will be able to play his or her own campaign without interference from other players. **play**

"Circle of Doom serves as a link between The Crusaders and its sequel. The story will begin from the ending of The Crusaders..."

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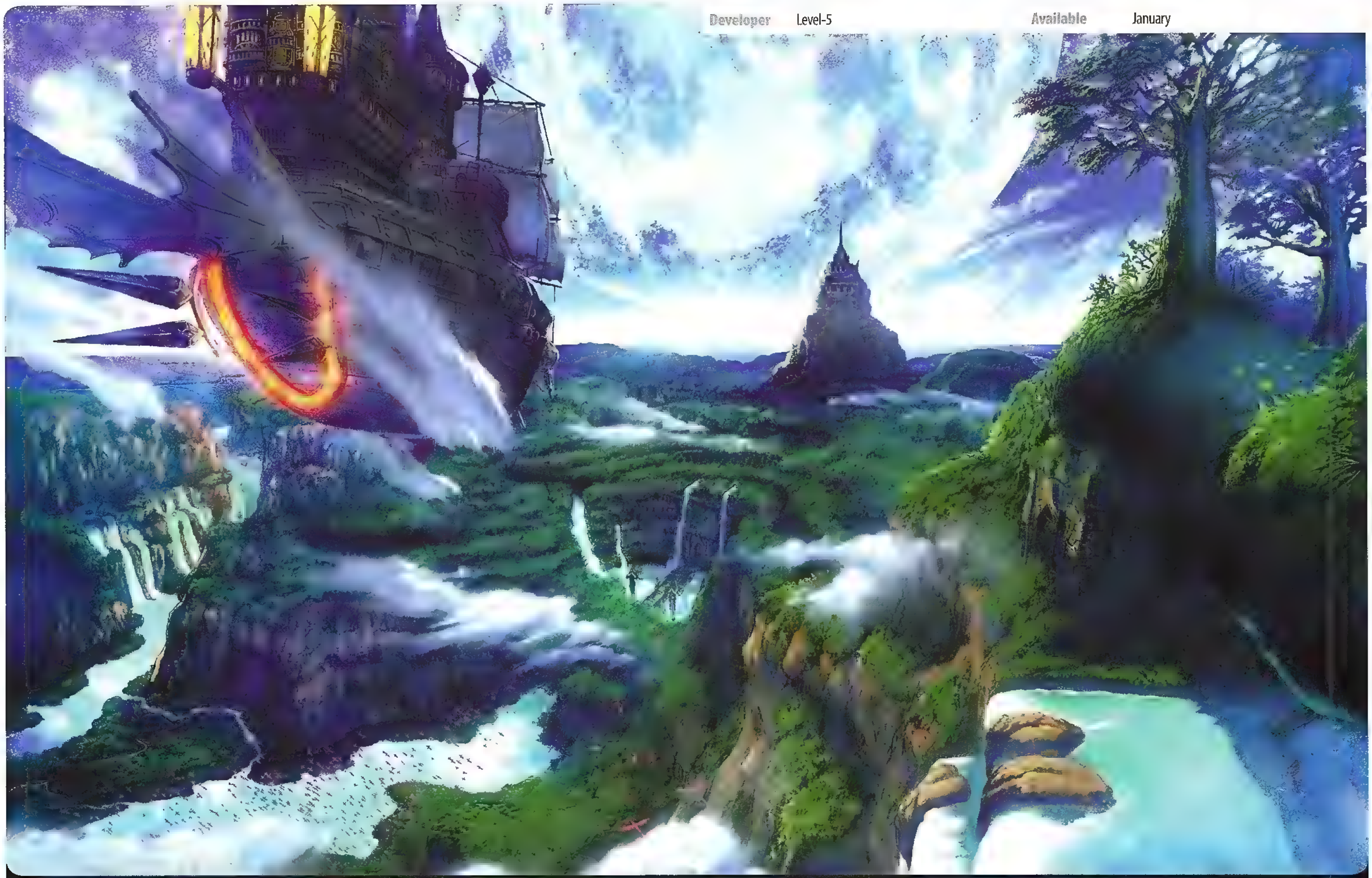
System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	SCEA
Developer	Level-5	Available	January



Rogue Galaxy

New, improved and ready for your PS2

words **Brady Fiechter**

As good as Dark Cloud 2 was on a number of levels—good enough to be one of my favorite of its kind on PlayStation 2—so much of its strength blossomed from a fantasy aesthetic of immense appeal. The modern classic Dragon Quest VIII carried that same wonderful spirit of visual energy that just worked in the ways I want an RPG to work.

Level-5, the venerable talent behind both these favorites, are proving once again that their artistic sensibilities share a place in my imagination. And while games are becoming more and more personal experiences, even the eye more in love with the Final Fantasy XIIs of the world should have no problem appreciating the cell-shaded grace of Rogue Galaxy. It's such a pleasure to look at.

In a general interview provided by Sony with Rogue Galaxy's American producer Nao Higo, he touched on some of the influences that seeded the world of Rogue Galaxy: "The game is heavily influenced by iconic action movies and popular sci-fi franchises. We even included nods to some of them in-game in the form of parodies. After working on Dark Cloud, Level-5 decided we wanted to do something different. So they discussed possible projects and decided upon making a sci-fi game. Space pirates actually weren't the initial choice—they toyed with the idea of a semi-futuristic game based around a [cyberspace premise]. But ultimately the concept didn't reflect Level-5's signature style, so they did some tweaking and thus we

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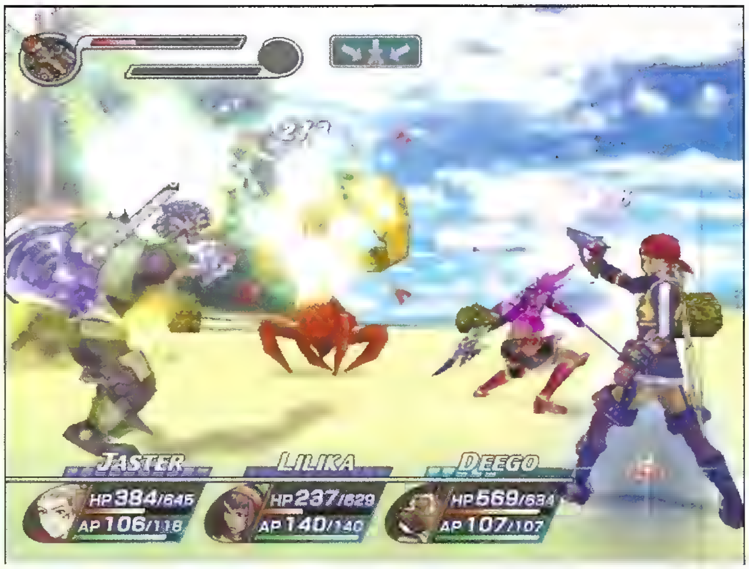


The ability system in action. Engaging battles for the discerning buccaneer.

have Rogue Galaxy."

That signature style has definitely become cemented in Rogue Galaxy, but there is indeed a tone and structure to the game that isn't going to make you feel like you're simply embarking on another Dragon Quest.

One of the big changes is in the battle system, which establishes real-time action sequences as you directly control a lead character with melee and projectile attacks, while indirectly guiding two other allies through the battle field. You can switch in and out between eight characters, and when the time comes for the more strategic decisions, the AI will actually ask you for suggestions, rather than allowing the computer to exhibit the typically stupid commands that plague similar systems seen in other RPGs.

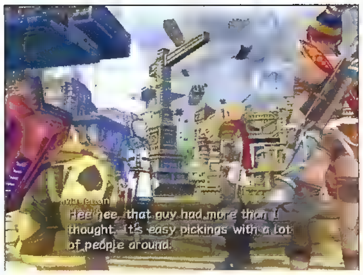
"The combat system isn't so much magic focused, but rather is based on an ability system," said Higo. "Each character has a certain set of special abilities that they can use. The combo system in this game allows the player to execute a barrage of strikes against an enemy to turn the tide of battle instantly. This system, called Burning Strike, is executed by collecting orbs that are dropped by the enemy during the course of battle. Once you gather enough orbs, you will be able to unleash the Burning Strike, a timed based combination system where you are able to chain together up to nine strikes."

The Burning Strike actually replaces the random chain attacks of the Japanese version. In an effort to liven up the battle system, other changes have also been made, including new ability animations and special attacks, rebalancing and sub menu additions, and an assortment of weapons and character upgrades. By locating schematics scattered through the land, you can up the ante by fashioning valuable items, and over 500 weapons can be synthesized for battle.

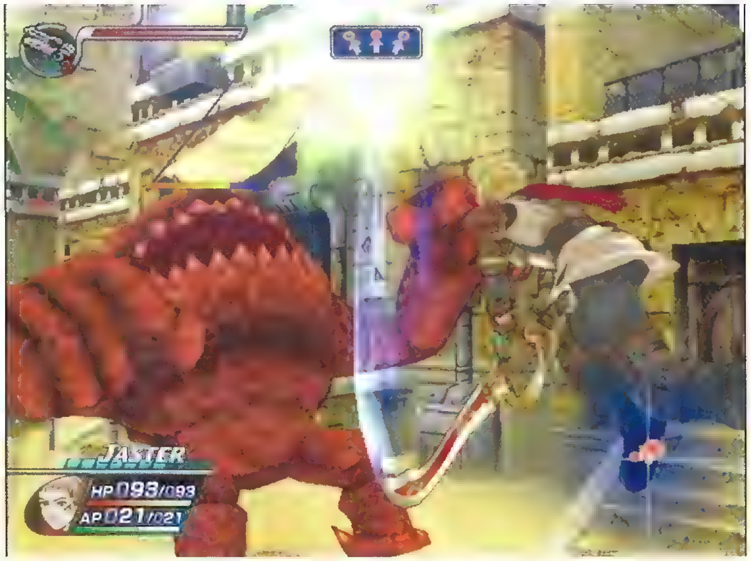
"It's the ultimate edition of the title, offering even more content than the Japanese release," said Higo. "We went all out for the U.S. edition, adding new worlds, scenarios, stages, and weapons. We've put in so much effort into this game that it really went beyond localization. It's the final realization of the team's original vision for the game."

The story, propelled through gorgeous cut scenes, follows a young man named Jaster, who escapes his primitive desert planet to set off on a space-pirate adventure. The most interesting thrust of the story is the motivation to travel to four main planets, with a bevy of side quests and plots to grab your attention if you need that extra weight in your RPG. A fifth area, the water planet Alisita, has also been designed to provide an additional side story.

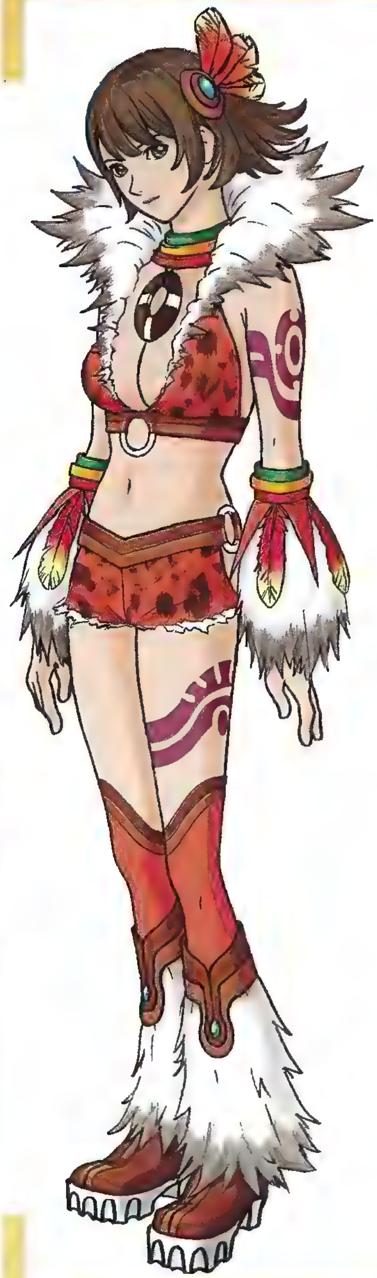
There's a lot to like about Rogue Galaxy as an import, and with criticisms of that version heard—the dungeon and map layout, along with visual presentation in a few larger areas, have been changed somewhat—this import is well worth a hungry RPGers tasting. Just remember: not everything can be as divine as Dragon Quest VIII. **play**

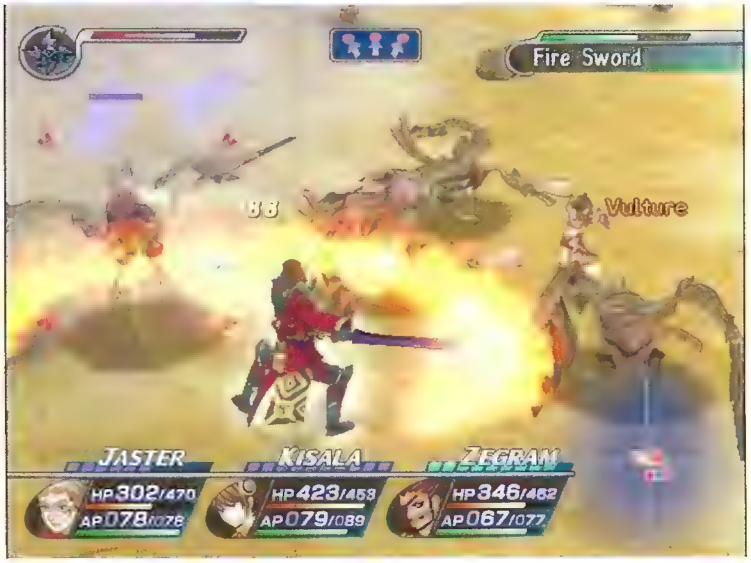

Hee hee, that guy had more than I thought. It's easy pickings with a lot of people around.

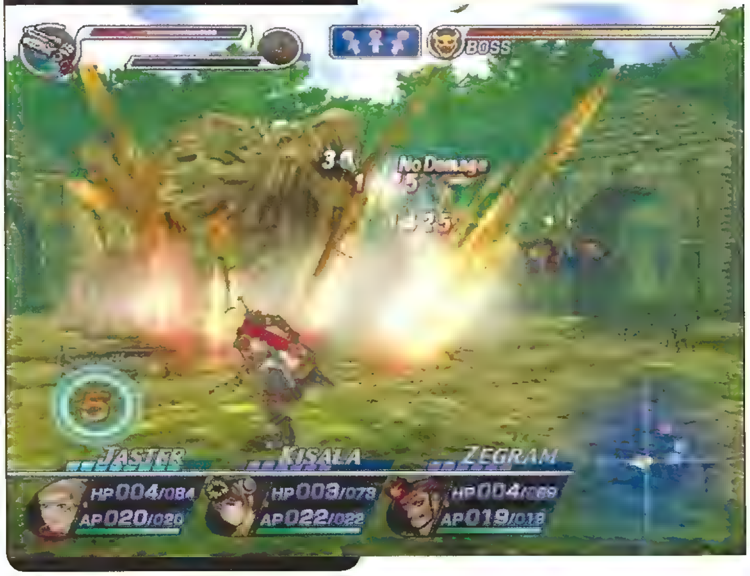
> "One of the big changes is in the battle system, which establishes real-time action sequences..."



His breath is worse than his bite.







System(s)	Wii, PS2, GBA, NDS, PC, X360, PSP	**Publisher**	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft	**Available**	Now

Rayman Raving Rabbids

[illegible]

words

The rabbids have taken over. So much so one might be inclined to wholly disregard the Rayman portion of Rayman Raving Rabbids. All the video trailers for the minigame-heavy title feature cute little bunnies doing wacky stuff: sitting on the toilet, dusting in a French maid's outfit, milking a cow, and infiltrating a game convention.

Rayman has become an afterthought in his own game.

It's not surprising, actually. The bunnies are extremely adorable, and their patented, wide-mouthed screams are an instantaneous hook. They may be the bad guys of Rabbids, but they are, in fact, stars of the show.

The plot for Rabbids sees Rayman captured and imprisoned after the bunnies have invaded and seized control. According to the game's manager Adrian Lacey, "The story begins with the invasion. The bunnies, lead by Jabba Rabbit, have enslaved Rayman and his friends, using them as a source of entertainment in their gladiator style trials, where they try to ridicule Rayman on a daily basis."

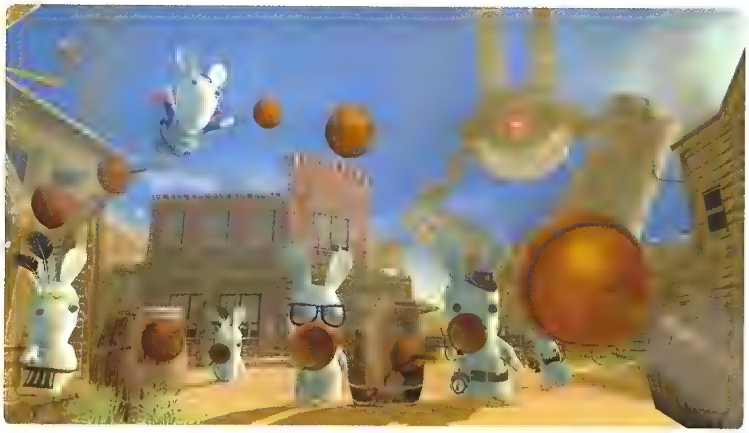
The gladiator-style trials are, of course, wacky minigames built with the Wii's motion-sensitive controls in mind. At recent press events in New York, publisher Ubisoft showed off Rabbids for the Wii, revealing some of its goofiest minigames.

In one challenge, players are required to furiously pump the Wii's nunchuk controller up and down. This causes a spray of carrot juice to shoot from the foreground of the screen toward a series of snorkel-mask wearing rabbids who are approaching from the sea. The idea here is to drown the targets; fill their masks up with juice, and the rabbids will sink. It's simple, to be sure, and equal parts fun and fatigue inducing. Few at either of the events could manage furious pumping of the Wii remote much past two minutes and 30 seconds.

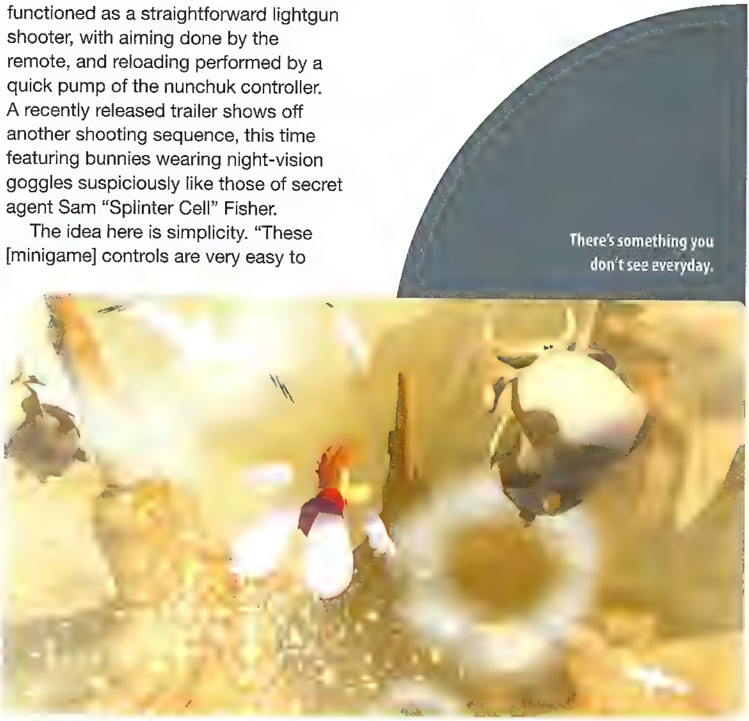
Other games proved even more absurd. In one, Rayman picked up a cow by a tail and began to swing it around, hammer-throw style; Swinging the Wii in rapid circles and releasing a button accomplished this particular feat. Yet another game had a hand (presumably Rayman's) slapping shut a series of toilet stall doors on a sandy beach. Shutting the doors on the stalls (accomplished by moving the remote and performing a flicking motion), prevented the screaming bunnies from shooting a plunger and thus ending the sequence.

First-person shooter challenges had an unidentified protagonist in a scene from the wild west blasting away at a series of oncoming enemies with (what else?) a toilet plunger. This sequence functioned as a straightforward lightgun shooter, with aiming done by the remote, and reloading performed by a quick pump of the nunchuk controller. A recently released trailer shows off another shooting sequence, this time featuring bunnies wearing night-vision goggles suspiciously like those of secret agent Sam "Splinter Cell" Fisher.

The idea here is simplicity. "These [minigame] controls are very easy to



There's something you don't see everyday.



“players are required to furiously pump the Wii’s nunchuk controller up and down...”

Check out these sons-a-beaches

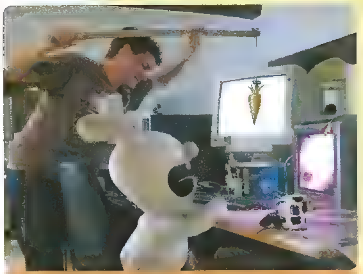
learn because both of your hands directly control Rayman’s hands, and we have kept it as a natural extension of Ray’s hands,” Lacey says.

All told, Rabbids holds some 70-odd minigames, and play will be fleshed out with special sequences where Rayman acquires different outfits (disco, goth, rock, etc.), encounters creatures who will help him in his quests, and gets into a series of brawls. Although the costumes were very much evident in the preview versions shown at the New York events, neither the creature segments nor the fighting was shown.

Lacey says, “In terms of fighting, this part is very different from what you are used to. The Wii controller (remote part) allows us to create deep interaction between Rayman and the player. If you give a real punch move, Rayman makes the same punch on screen: i.e. you make a punch from right to left, Rayman does the same move from right to left. If you shake the controller, Rayman will do some special kung-fu style moves. Rayman can grapple, too. If you make a quick move with the nunchuck, Rayman will grapple the nearest enemies or objects. You can then make them spin around Rayman with the remote and throw them (as projectiles) just by swinging the controller around your head.”

Dancing also features prominently in the game, with the bunnies easily impressed by fancy footwork. Music hath charms, according to Lacey, and the rabbids won’t attack in the midst of a musical segment. Exactly how this factors into the game is, at press time, a well-guarded secret.

This is certainly a new direction for Rayman, and time will tell if its formula is the proverbial rabbid’s foot the developers hope it is. Wii shall see, certainly, pardon the hideous pun. **play**



Developer Fun

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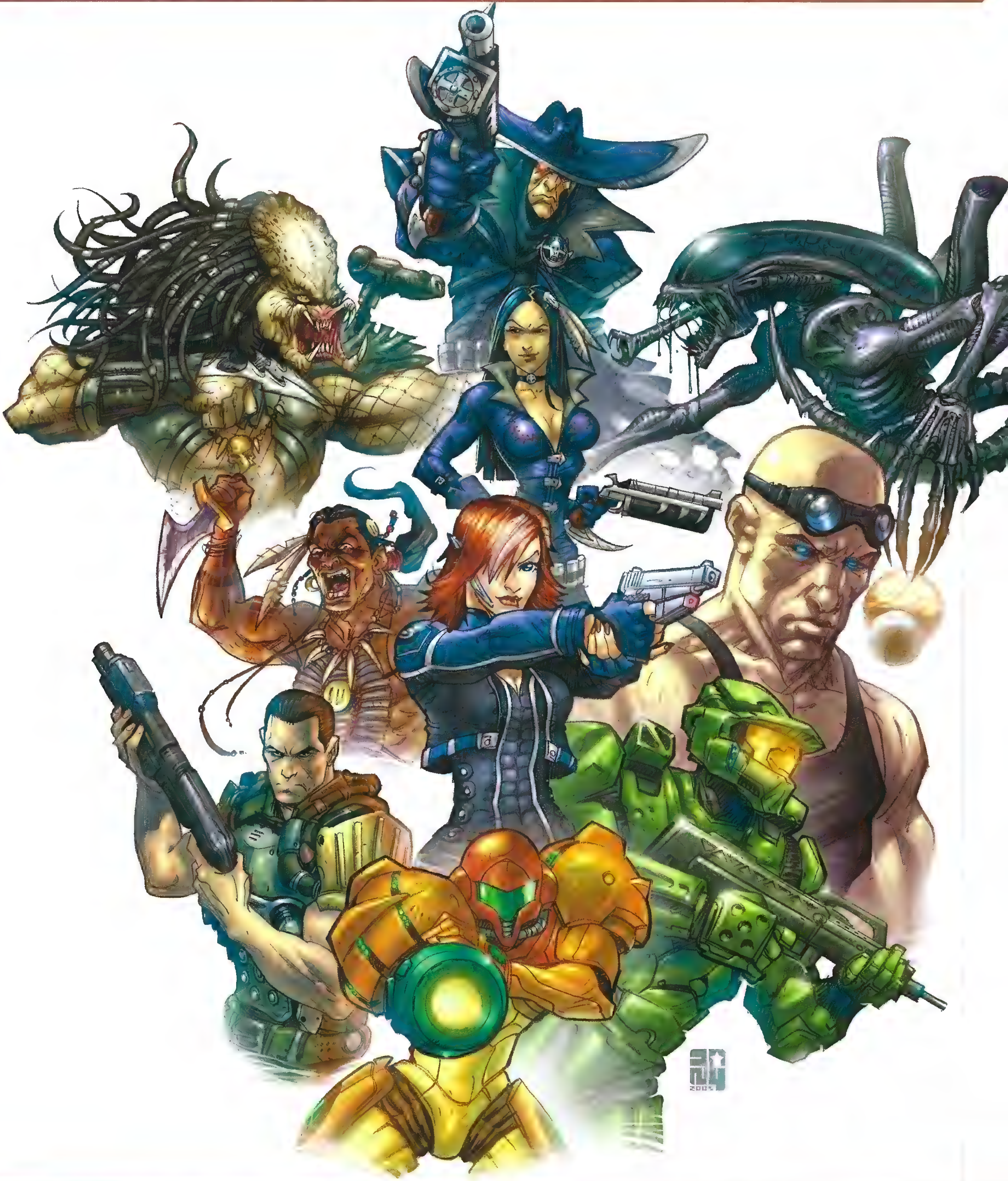


Art: Dany Orizio

Best-of series Part 4

First Person Shooter FPS

compiled by Dave Halverson

As great a list this is, a bevy of beastly new first-person-shooters will soon take center stage: Resistance: Fall of Man, Turok, Unreal Tournament 2007, The Darkness, Bioshock, Halo 3, and Call of Duty 3—all of which will inevitably move into the top spots.

Perhaps new technology will give our instruments of wanton destruction feet and legs, and the ability to climb ladders like actual bi-pedal beings…Regardless, we've seen what's coming and it's going to pave the way for an entirely new level of in your face gameplay.

modus operandi

Tricks of the trade

Most protagonists are floating torsos with no legs or feet with the ability to float vertically up ladders.

Can pick things up by gliding over them.

Able to carry and access massive firearms from thin air.

Able to drive without touching the steering wheel.

Able to carry boxes and open doors with no hands.

Massive crates and barrels that hold one tiny clip of ammo a piece.

Squadrons of poorly armed human chum who are eager to run into battle in front of someone with high-tech armor and vastly superior weaponry.

For smooth shooting goodness, it's either Nazis or zombies. Better still, zombie Nazis.

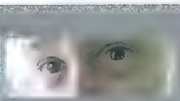
Explosive barrels are the new, hip hot spot for enemies. They're the watercooler for the 21st century!

When in doubt, aim for the head.

Consensus
play Top 25

1) Metroid Prime GameCube / Retro
2) Half Life PC / Valve Software
3) Call of Duty 2 Xbox 360 / Irrational Games
4) Halo Xbox / Bungie
5) The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay Xbox / Starbreeze
6) Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil Xbox / id
7) Goldeneye N64 / Rare
8) Doom PlayStation / id Software
9) Half Life 2 P C/ Valve Software
10) Unreal Tournament 2004 PC / Epic
11) Halo 2 Xbox / Bungie
12) Condemned Xbox 360 / Monolith
13) Counterstrike Xbox / Valve Software
14) System Shock 2 PC / Irrational Games
15) Deus Ex PC / Ion Storm
16) Quake 2 PC / id Sotware
17) Prey Xbox 360 / Human Head
18) Medal of Honor PlayStation / EA
19) Quake 4 PC / id Software
20) F.E.A.R. PC / Monolith
21) Darkwatch Xbox / High Moon
22) Far Cry PC / Crytek
23) Perfect Dark N64 / Rare
24) Perfect Dark Zero Xbox 360 / Rare
25) Alien vs. Predator Atari Jaguar / Rebellion

Dave Halverson
Top Ten



1) Halo Xbox / Bungie
2) Condemned Xbox 360 / Monolith
3) Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay Xbox / Starbreeze
4) Metroid Prime GameCube / Retro
5) Darkwatch Xbox / High Moon
6) Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil Xbox /id Software
7) Perfect Dark Zero Xbox 360 / Rare
8) Painkiller Xbox / People Can Fly
9) Prey Xbox 360 / Human Head
10) TimeSplitters: Future Perfect Xbox / Free Radical

Casey Loe
Top Ten

1) Halo Xbox / Bungie
2) Half-Life PC / Valve Software
3) Doom 2 PC / id Software
4) System Shock 2 PC / Irrational Games
5) Enemy Zero Saturn / Sega
6) Medal of Honor PlayStation / EA
7) Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter Xbox / UbiSoft
8) Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butchers Bay Xbox / Starbreeze
9) Call of Duty PC / Infinity Ward
10) Far Cry PC / Crytek

Brady Fiechter
Top Ten

1) Doom PS / id
2) Metroid Prime GameCube / Retro
3) Call of Duty 2 Activision / Xbox 360
4) Half Life 2 PC / Valve
5) Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay Xbox / Starbreeze
6) Halo Xbox / Bungie
7) Goldeneye N64 / Rare
8) Medal of Honor PlayStation / EA
9) Medal of Honor: Frontline PS2 / EA
10) Turok N64 / Acclaim

Eric Patterson
Top Ten

1) Unreal Tournament 2004 PC / Epic
2) Halo 2 Xbox / Bungie
3) Metroid Prime GameCube / Retro
4) Half Life PC / Valve Software
5) Counterstrike Xbox/Valve Software
6) Goldeneye N64 / Rare
7) Quake II PlayStation / Hammerhead
8) PowerSlave Saturn / Lobotomy
9) Silent Debuggers TurboGrafx-16 / Data East
10) Outtrigger Dreamcast / Sega

Greg Orlando
Top Ten

1) Half-Life PC / Valve Software
2) Deus Ex PC / Ion Storm
3) Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil Xbox / id Software
4) Counterstrike Xbox / Valve Software
5) Quake PC / id
6) Call of Duty 2 Xbox 360/ Infinity Ward
7) System Shock PC / Irrational Games
8) DOOM PC / id Software
9) F.E.A.R. PC / Monolith
10) Unreal Tournament 2004 PC / Epic

[illegible]
Top Ten

1) Half-Life 2 PC / Valve Software
2) Half-Life PC / Valve Software
3) Half-Life 2 Ep.1 PC / Valve Software
4) Quake 2 PC / id Software
5) System Shock 2 PC / Irrational Games
6) F.E.A.R PC / Monolith
7) Call of Duty 2 PC / Infinity Ward
8) Deus Ex PC / Ion Storm
9) Doom 3 PC / id Software
10) Metroid Prime GameCube / Retro Studios

play
Staff Round-up

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Reviews
December 2006

Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

[illegible]

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

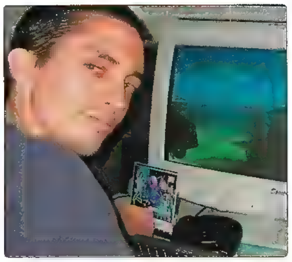
[illegible]

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

Favorite genre: [illegible]
Most anticipated '07 title: Mass Effect

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

[illegible]

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

play magazine
GAME of the MONTH
Sonic the Hedgehog
p.016

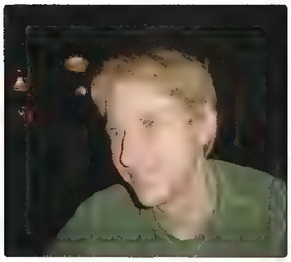
The play rating system

10...Perfect
9...Extraordinary
8...Great
7...Good
6...Decent
5...Average
4...Below average
3...Poor
2...Bad
1...Terrible

Nick Des Barres
Japan Editor

[illegible]

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.



Casey Loe
Contributing Editor

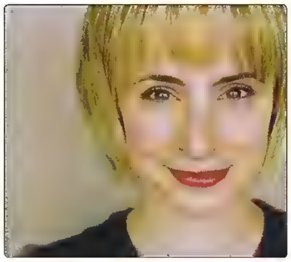
[illegible]

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

[illegible]

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?



Heather Campbell
Associate Editor

[illegible]

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.

Mike Hobbs
Art Director

[illegible]

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

TALES OF THE ABYSS™

Critical Damage
2 Hits
84Damage

A TALE OF HONOR AND SACRIFICE, DUTY AND CHOICE, WHAT IS WRITTEN AND WHAT WILL BE.

Luke fon Fabre, sole heir to a family of aristocrats was kidnapped seven years ago, and the shock left him with no memories of his life before. He has since led a quiet, boring life within the family's residence, learning little of the world beyond the palace walls. Suddenly thrust into the outside world, Luke is caught in the workings of the Order of Lorelei, keepers of the prophecy known as the Score. No longer sheltered by the palace, Luke must get along in the confusing and often hostile world. He knows nothing about those who might be his friends, or those who already are his enemies. He has not yet noticed the evil that is drawing close to him.

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Alcohol Reference
Fantasy Violence
Language
Simulated Gambling
Suggestive Themes

PlayStation®2

BANDAI NAMCO Games™

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System(s)	Wii	Publisher	Sega	Available	Now
Developer	Sega	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E

Super Monkey Ball Banana Blitz

Belle of the Ball

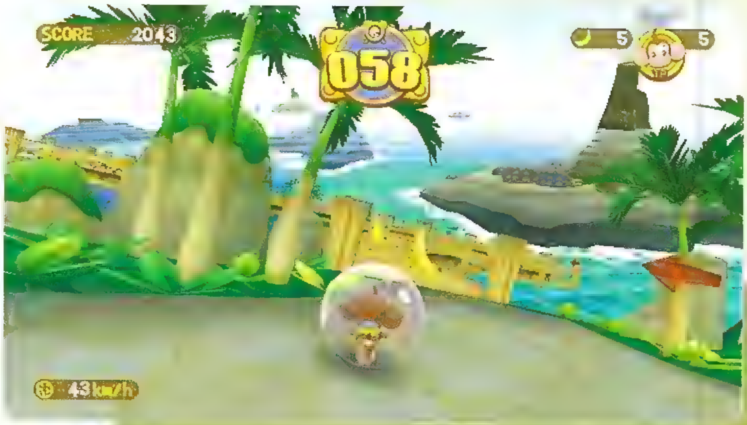
words **Greg Orlando**

There's no debating the merits of monkeys shoved into translucent orbs for the purpose of navigating through cleverly designed courses; the mechanic is one of video games' finest, on par with well-established classics such as the zombie shooter and the Nazi shooter. Sega's struck gold with its Monkey Ball franchise and, except for a little roll through a pile of stinkiness—the finger is pointed squarely at the recent Super Monkey Ball Adventures—these encapsulated primates can do no wrong.

Super Monkey Ball Banana Blitz continues this fine tradition. Because it utilizes a wholly different control scheme than its predecessors in the Wii's motion-sensitive remote controller, it was a very real concern the game would shoot wildly off the track and into a bottomless pit. Thankfully, this hasn't happened. Moreover, Sega's done a fine job translating the control scheme for a game that demands precise movements to a controller that is, at best, imprecise. Players control their chosen monkey by tilting the Wii remote. Tilting it down causes a monkey to speed up and raising it slows movement. Turns are handled by pointing the controller to the left or right, and pressing the controller's A button causes the monkey to jump. The natural instinct here is to jerk the remote wildly, but players will find it's not necessary at all. Subtle movements are more than sufficient to get the monkeys to perform—and allowances are made for less talented players in the form of monkeys who possess different movement characteristics and whose balls are of varying sizes. Those inclined to swing the remote like a duelist might be better served to play with GonGon, a heavier monkey whose ball moves more slowly and has better handling.

Sadly, the control scheme makes no allowances for player adjustments in-game. This leads to disorienting shifts when a monkey has to arrest its movement to wait for a platform to arrive, or to avoid being hurled off a ledge. It is, of course, necessary to see where the monkey is going, but the rapid camera shifts are nonetheless jarring. The game would either do well to somehow soften the blow, perhaps by gently pulling the camera back to allow players to see [illegible] to allow direct manipulation of the view.

[illegible] that is bright and colorful, and upbeat music is jackhammered home at all times. Individual courses range from the straightforward to the damning, and players will encounter all manner of obstacles in their path. One pirate-themed level has players ascending a huge spiral that's pitted with a series of near-blind jumps; another stage features a series of booster platforms that send monkeys flying up the face of a ziggurat, with the catch being they're likely to rocket right past the level's goal target if they don't aim right. Fifty different minigames supplement the main adventure. Some are excellent, requiring players to shoot aliens in a goofy first-person gunfight or swing the Wii remote wildly to perform a hammer throw. But most are simple filler, not fun [illegible] hey! That's the way the ball bounces—or rolls—sometimes, play.



SCORE 24660
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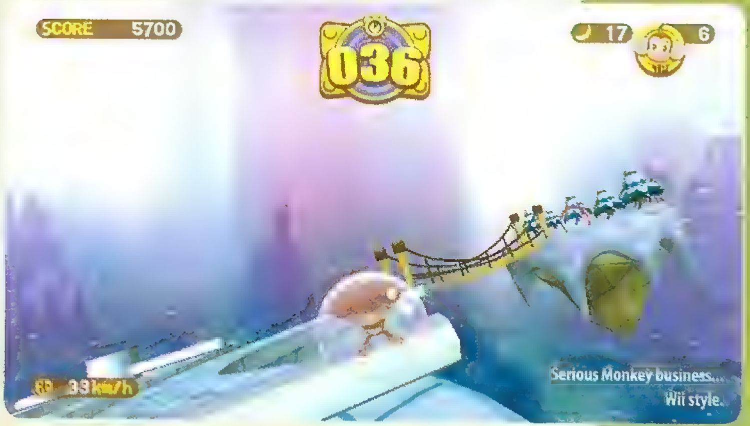
9
10 km/h

SCORE 11060
041
11
9
23 km/h



Serious Monkey business... Wii style.

Super Monkey Ball Banana Blitz

score 8.0

+	Bright, colorful, laden with monkeys, good use of Wii controls
–	A lot of filler minigames; players locked out of camera control

NEW GAMES. ORIGINAL XBOX.
NASCAR 07
CALL OF DUTY 3
MORTAL KOMBAT ARMAGEDDON
FAMILY GUY VIDEO GAME! It's too HOT for TV!
JUSTICE LEAGUE HEROES
AVATAR THE LAST AIRBENDER
DESTROY ALL HUMANS! 2
SCARFACE THE WORLD IS YOURS
THRILLVILLE
TONY HAWK'S PROJECT 8
PRODUCTS RANGE FROM RATING PENDING TO MATURE
RP-M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
XBOX LIVE
XBOX
www.xbox.com

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System(s)	Xbox	Publisher	Play Logic	Available	November
Developer	Evolved Games	Online/Multi	2-player co-op	ESRB Rating	Teen

Xyanide

Deep Space Fine

words Dave Halverson

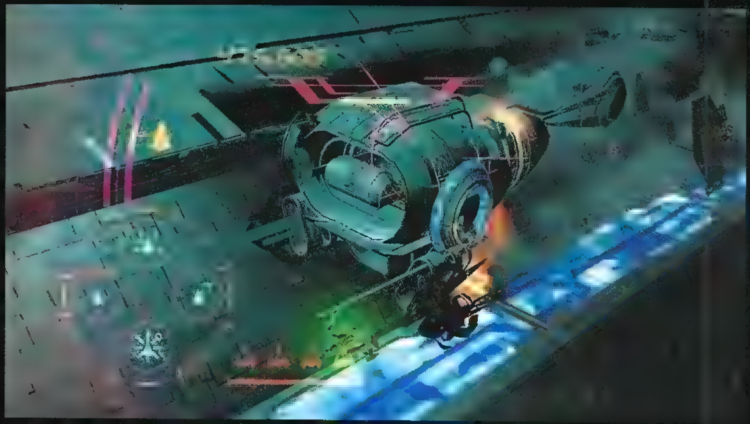
Are the seas boiling? Locusts pouring from the sky? No? Then how can this be? How is it that I'm playing…a shooter!! A 3D space shooter on Xbox no less. For those of you who still 1) care, and 2) have your Xbox plugged in, read on.

Not only is Xyanide a 3D space shooter but it is like no other you have ever seen or played. It's actually a benchmark title. This is not your garden variety arcade-style button masher. Xyanide begins with a hypnotic 5-minute CG movie that probably cost more to make than most shooters alone. It's as if Stanley Kubrick is channeling the story from the afterlife. The tone is exquisite and it carries over into the luminous gameplay. Breaking from the norm; boisterous effects and fake-looking glowing dots are replaced by the eerily serene. It feels like deep space, as the camera dances around your ship, switching viewpoints as if a cinematographer crafted the voyage. The requisite tangibles are here: pick-ups, multiple paths, variable difficulty, co-op play and offensive and defensive upgrades, but the execution is integrated seamlessly—no floating letters here. Rather than merely powering-up, your ship evolves via mechanical or organic mutation lines which determine your offensive and defensive status. It may sound corny but I actually got butterflies the first time I played as I began to pick up on the game's technicalities. There are no buttons involved. Maneuvering is on the left analog and shooting on the right. Since enemies tend to swarm around your ship it becomes a dance of moving and spinning your firepower.

I shudder to even mention it but Xyanide adheres to the standard six level/six boss model, although mid-bosses, multiple paths and long levels make it a long game by shooter standards. I know everyone wants 20-hour games though, so all I can say is that over the course of the next few months I'll play Xyanide for well over that. And so should you. **play**

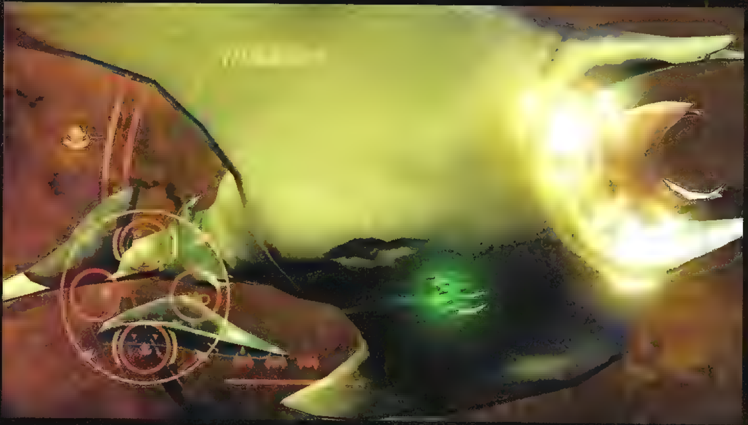
Xyanide score 9.0

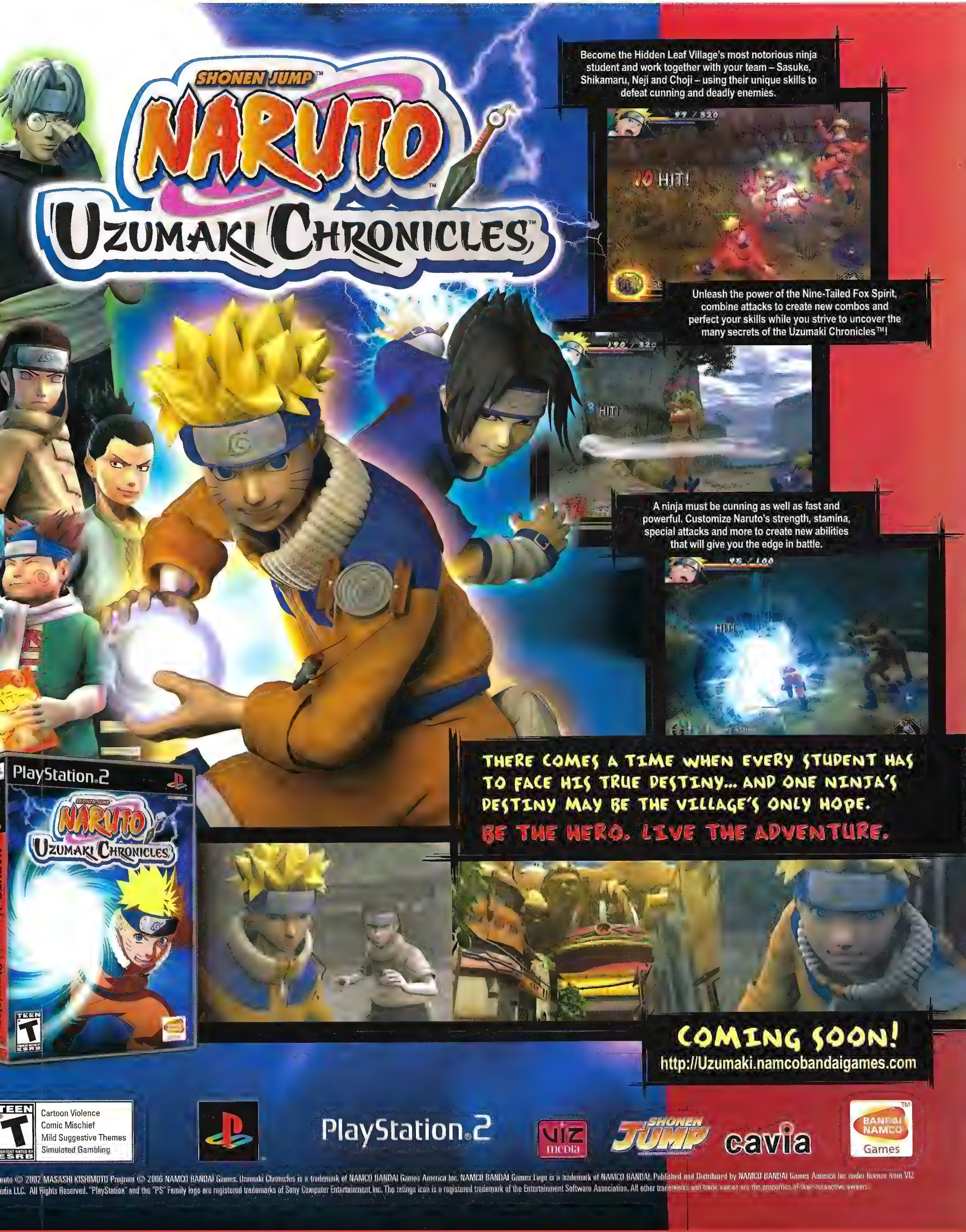
+	A trance-inducing art-bathed excursion through space with a real story
-	It's too late to reawaken the genre…PL needs to enhance it and give us a 360 version



> "Not only is Xyanide a 3D space shooter but it is like no other you have ever seen or played."

In space nobody can hear you internally combust.





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TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Cartoon Violence
Comic Mischief
Mild Suggestive Themes
Simulated Gambling

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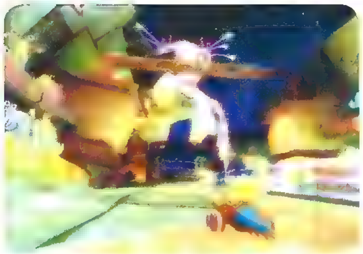
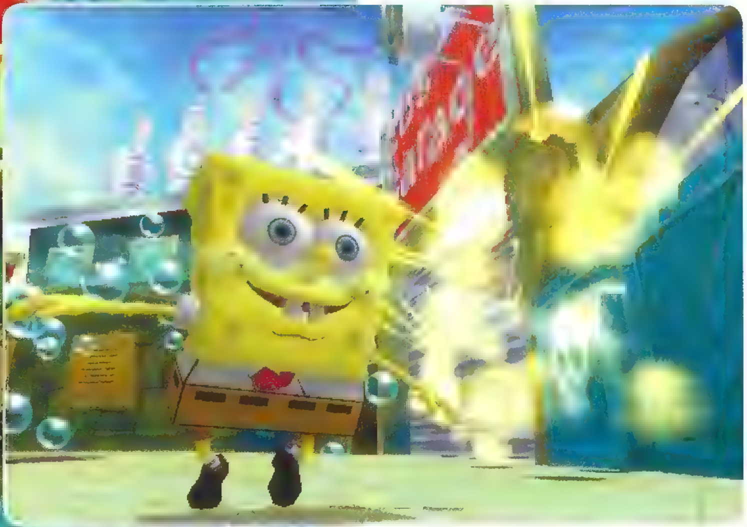
System(s)	PlayStation 2, GameCube, Wii	Publisher	THQ	Available	October, (Wii 11 13)
Developer	Blitz Games	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E





SpongeBob Squarepants

Creature from the Krusty Krab

Who dreams in a pineapple under the sea?

words **Dave Halverson**

I'm surprised they even let kids watch SpongeBob anymore. After this game, maybe they won't. They might as well just throw in cursing and barnacle sex and stick it in Prime Time. "Sponge or no Sponge?!" Taking things from Heavy Iron over to Blitz games, things have gotten damn near out of control, mostly in a good way...unless you're ten, in which case you will need therapy. You thought Bob was weird before? Well, this one's all a dream, so the gloves are off. Try blood-shot bug-eyed Rat-Fink mutant Bob in Diesel Dreams burning up the ocean floor in his hot-rod; or better yet, Sheldon J. Plankton getting run down by a giant Krabby Patty. The game jumps all over the place, from Patrick as Starfishman to SpongeBob being swallowed by a giant Alaskan worm, to airborne battles, to Plankton turning the tables on the giant Krabby Patty...and then some.

The problem is (for me) that they had me at Diesel Dreams and the cool SpongeBob platforming that follows. Trippy graphics, cool effects, nice puzzles...and then all of a sudden I'm Patrick starring in a completely different game. Changing up the gameplay is one thing, but Patrick's Starfishman level looks like a throwback from the N64. But then the game goes back to looking great, and so it waffles in and out of scenarios for the duration. In the end there's more good than bad (the aerial stuff and Plankton chase are classic), but it's incohesive...like a string of long mini games (although it has bonus games too). If you like the scenario you're in, it's a blast. But if you don't, the opposite applies. My bet is that the game was really designed to take advantage of the Wii—hence all the various scenarios/gameplay—and if they enhance some of the visuals it'll probably be one of the better [illegible]. I'll give 'em this: it's never boring, always whacked out of its mind, and the control throughout delivers...Nunchuk or not. So in closing, may the Sponge be with you. **play**

SpongeBob Squarepants: Creature from the Krusty Krab score 7.0

+ [illegible]

– Some not so great levels

"It's never boring, always whacked out of its mind and the control throughout delivers...Nunchuk or not."

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Leather meets magic in the follow-up to the best-selling Castlevania DS adventure, Dawn of Sorrow. Take control of Jonathan, a young vampire hunter and Charlotte, a powerful spellcaster and journey through magical portals created within Dracula's castle. Defeat twin vampire sisters, an ancient vampire lord and uncover the mysteries of a noble spirit trapped within the accursed walls.

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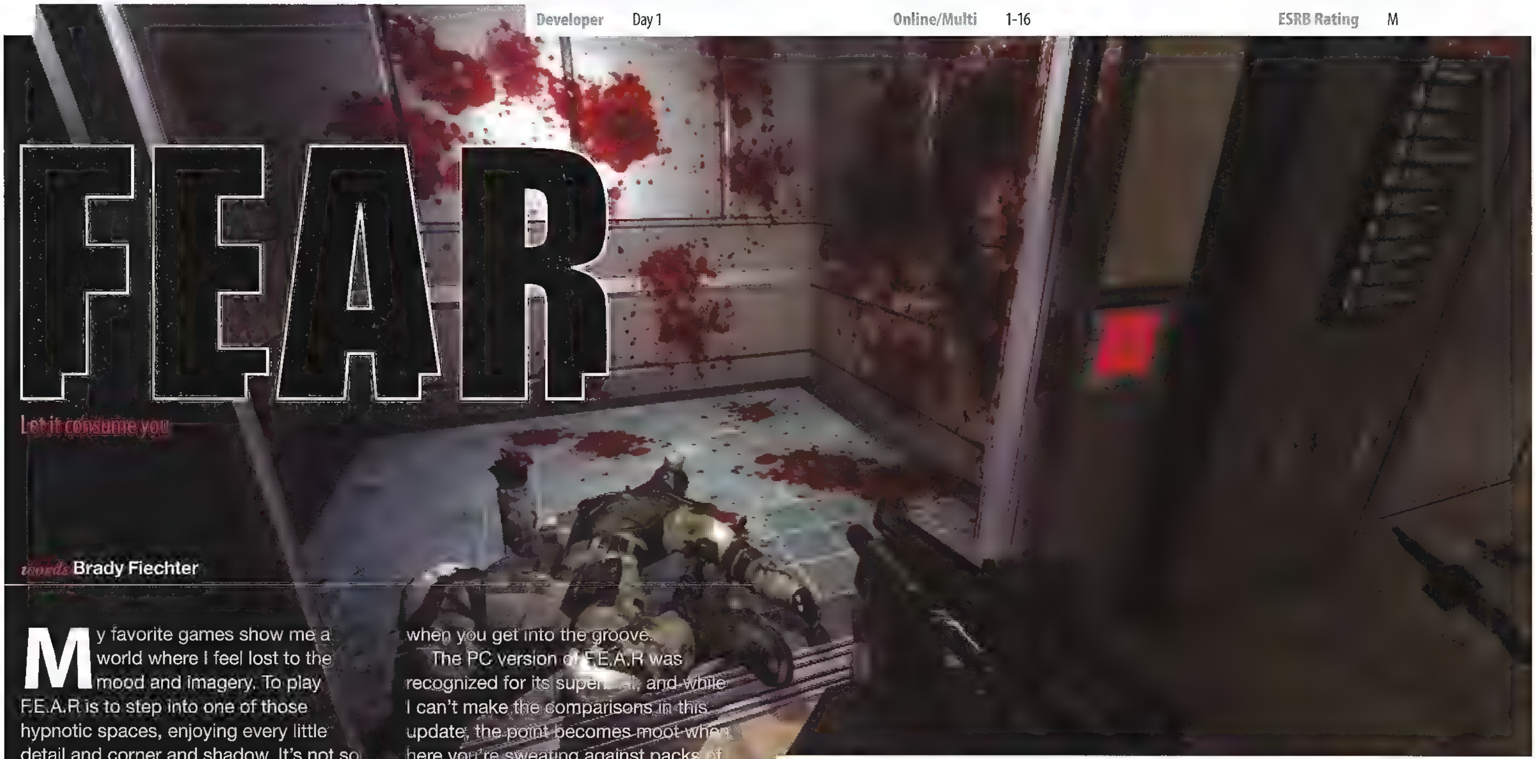
System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC	Publisher	Vivendi	Available	November
Developer	Day 1	Online/Multi	1-16	ESRB Rating	M



FEAR

Let it consume you

words **Brady Fiechter**

My favorite games show me a world where I feel lost to the mood and imagery. To play F.E.A.R is to step into one of those hypnotic spaces, enjoying every little detail and corner and shadow. It's not so much the technology behind the game that's so impressive, but the superb craft and design of it all.

The game mixes dread and horror with military first-person shooting for a nicely unique experience, a highlight for a genre that doesn't do so well with innovation. Even the use of slow-motion shootouts may not sound like anything to get too worked up about, but F.E.A.R presents the mechanic in a way that keeps you on edge and steeped in strategy.

There's definitely a learning curve to F.E.A.R that takes patience and precision. The targeting system doesn't hold your hand like in some first-person shooters, requiring a skilled touch that's part of the appeal of setting the feel of the game apart from its peers. A rather complex gameplay scheme is utilized during combat, coming off almost like a string of combination attacks; you're not just running into a duck-and-cover room and clearing out the heavy resistance with machine gun blasting, forced instead to deal with all sorts of actions that really ratchet up the sense of a satisfying kill when you get into the groove.

The PC version of F.E.A.R was recognized for its superb AI, and while I can't make the comparisons in this update, the point becomes moot when here you're sweating against packs of enemies with such impressive intelligence and daunting patterns of resistance. The expression of awareness you come across during firefights certainly builds that awesome impression of existing in that world that goes beyond a mechanical gameplay factory.

As a straight shooter, the game can stumble in its almost too-technical approach to its gameplay and level structure, pulling down the high notes with mundane stretches. But the engaging paranormal angle to the story and the violent imagery rising from it breathe a creepy chill into F.E.A.R's soul that never lets the game lose its powerful grip. **play**

F.E.A.R.

score 8.5

+	Instant-action mode a fun way of challenging people over Live, with scores tallied up according to the efficiency of your play through additional timed levels
–	A little tedious at times

"To play F.E.A.R is to step into one of those hypnotic spaces, enjoying every little detail and corner and shadow."

Aggressive enemies get right in your face...

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PlayStation®Portable

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System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Namco Bandai Games Inc.	Available	November
Developer	Smart Bomb Games	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E

Snoopy vs. The Red Baron

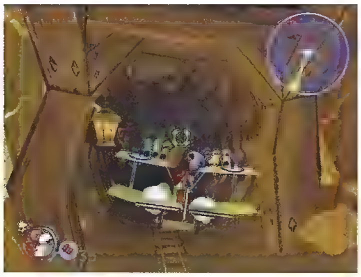
If there's one things kid love more than Snoopy, it's World War I

Years of playing bad licensed games have made me so cynical that my first reaction to playing a good one is confusion. Why would anyone bother putting much effort into a game like this when older gamers will just scoff, and younger ones won't know the difference? But I guess Namco-Bandai and developer Smart Bomb have a different philosophy, because Snoopy vs. The Red Baron is way, way better than you'd think it would be.

The game is set in a bright, cartoony version of World War I-era Europe, where Snoopy's latest novel has put the entire cast of Peanuts in charge of winning the war. The game's structure and mechanics are reminiscent of Sony's Warhawk series: you pilot Snoopy's Sopwith Camel through dozens of missions in six open-world areas, each of which contains a series of shifting primary objectives (chase a plane, guard a tower, infiltrate the enemy base, etc.) as well as several secondary objectives and optional collectibles. The final mission of each area is an on-rails boss battle, which provides an arcadey bit of Panzer Dragoon flavor and a welcome change of pace. The environments are beautiful; there is no apparent pop-in and the textures look fantastic, especially when you set the graphics to 480p resolution. The environments are bright, colorful and rich in variety, far from the usual grey-to-blue palette of most shooters.

Snoopy's Sopwith Camel can perform all sorts of cool dog-fighting tricks, but the game never really captures the thrill of high-speed air combat—you spend so much time holding down the brakes and blasting ground-based targets that they might as well have called the game Snoopy's Apache Helicopter Blast-a-thon. But the controls are easy and accessible, and the game is both forgiving of mistakes and generous with ammo and healing items. The difficulty is geared for kids, and there's no option to change it, so a reasonably skilled player can blow through the campaign mode in a day or two. But the surprise is that they'll enjoy every minute of it; with a wide variety of mission objectives, enemies, purchasable weapons and unlockable characters, Snoopy vs. The Red Baron never stops trying to please.

I know you're probably much, much too cool to buy this game for personal use, but if you have a child in your life, you can pretend you're buying it for their benefit, then play the hell out of it late at night with the curtains drawn. No one needs to know! **play**



Snoopy vs. The Red Baron

score 8.0

+ Pretty, accessible, and packed with variety

– Short, no difficulty modes, someone you know might see you buy it

"The environments are beautiful; there is no apparent pop-in and the textures look fantastic..."

Woodstock is one mean gunner.

Nantuko Husk
Serra Angel
Creature — Angel
Greg Staples
4/4
Aven
Adark
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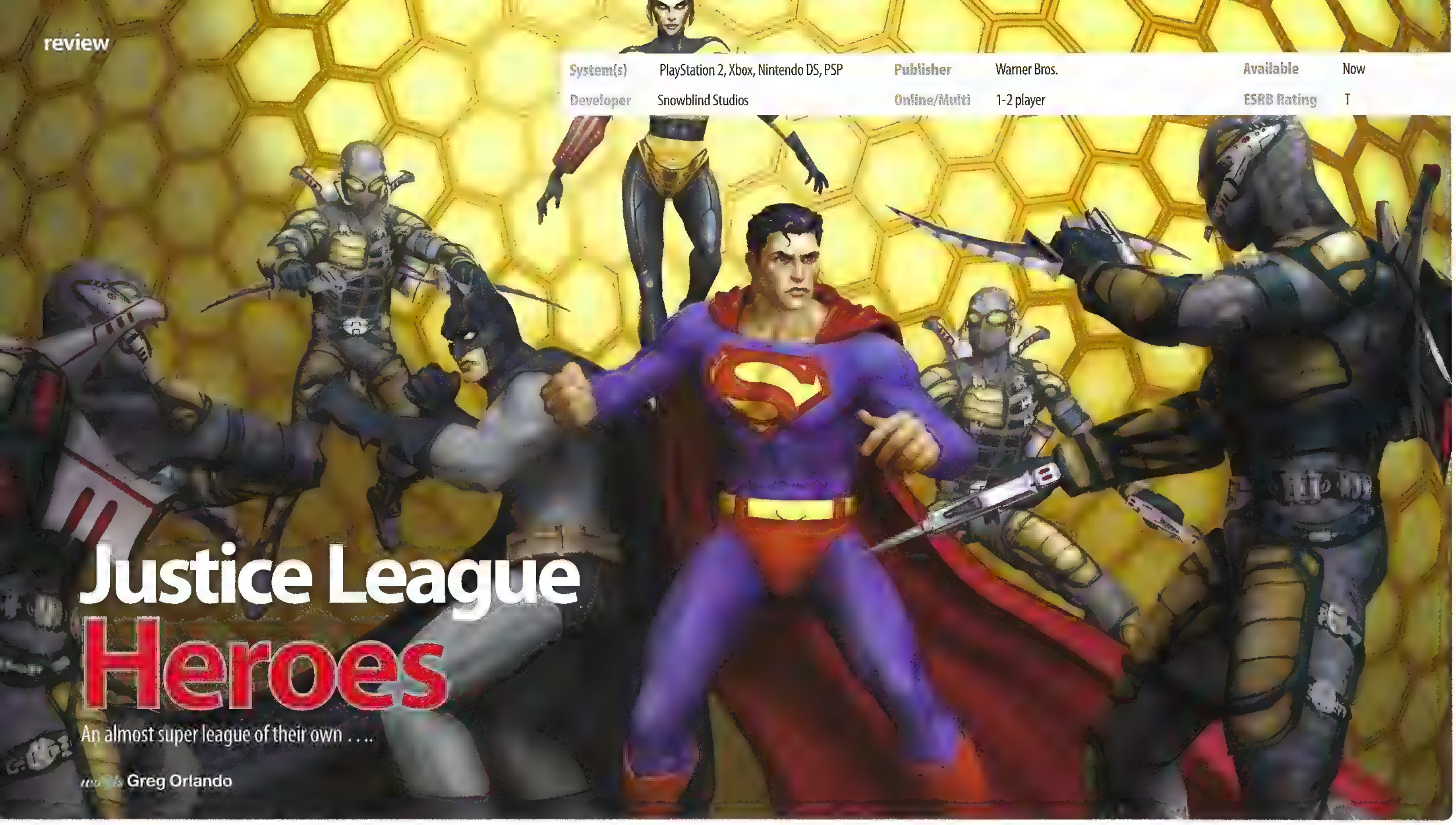

System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox, Nintendo DS, PSP	Publisher	Warner Bros.	Available	Now
Developer	Snowblind Studios	Online/Multi	1-2 player	ESRB Rating	T

Justice League Heroes

An almost super league of their own . . . .

words Greg Orlando

You could be heroes. The question is, do you want to be the world's greatest superheroes in one of video games' more timid beat-'em-ups?

Justice League Heroes brings together DC Comics' big guns: Superman, Batman, Green Lantern, Flash, and Wonder Woman, along with some of its bit players in Green Arrow, Zatanna, and Hawkgirl for what is largely a cookie-cutter brawler. The game presents you with near-endless waves of robots, drones, gorillas, alien mushroom-things, and—this is true, and absolutely not an exaggeration—bees to punch and kick. Now that's criminal misuse of a superhero in the first degree right there.

Two buttons are used to create strong- and weak attacks, and the buttons can be strung together to create combination hits. Objects can be picked up and used as clubs against enemies, or tossed at foes; the stronger superheroes can lift cars and trucks, whereas the punier ones have to settle for crates and the like. Double jumping allows some heroes to fly (slowly), and each character can access a series of superpowers.

The game makes some poor choices in terms of the League members' powers. Instead of creating a workable system where heroes can access their powers naturally, the developers opted to use the well-worn system found in other beat-'em-ups starring heroes from another comic book company, and shoehorn the DC characters into it. Flash, for example, moves at normal speed until his powers are accessed—which makes him the world's fastest man for about three seconds. Green Lantern can use his mighty power ring maybe twice before he needs to let its energy recharge, forcing him to knock out about 90 percent of the foes he faces. Wonder Woman must expend energy to throw a lasso. None of this is true to the heroes. Even less than none of this makes sense.

> "A nice series of role-playing game elements let you customize the superheroes..."

Yet the game is not without its charms. A nice series of role-playing game elements let you customize the superheroes and expand their powers. Boosts can be collected to augment individual powers in different ways, modifying their damage, speed, efficiency, duration, and luck. These powerups can be merged, with three boosts used to create a new, more powerful effect. You can then attach these to either a hero's basic skills and attributes (health, fighting) or to his powers. It becomes highly beneficial, say, to beef up Superman's heat vision with lots of duration and damage boosts, or altering the Flash's super-whirlwind so it's highly efficient and takes almost no energy to pull off.

Justice here isn't always pretty. But it gets the job done. Barely. **play**

Justice League Heroes score 6.0

+ Good co-op action; nice upgrade options for the heroes

– Game is simpleminded; someone's idea of a bonus is the ability to unlock Aquaman

Don't they know that he's super?

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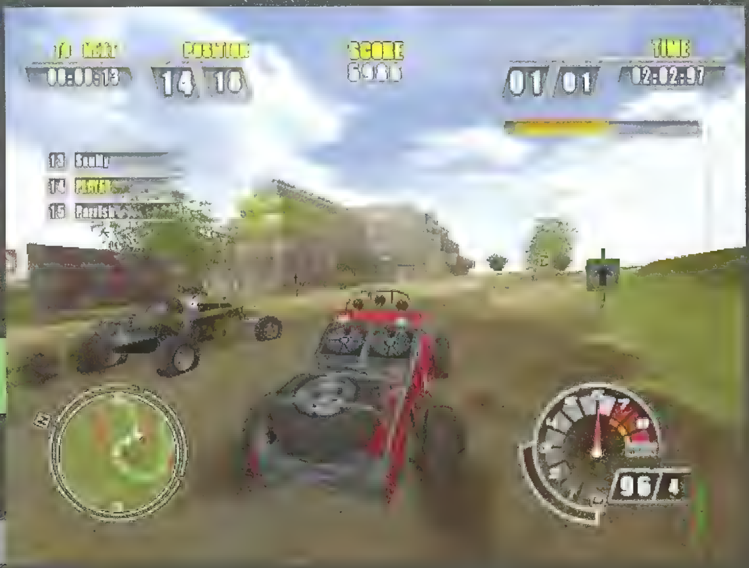
System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	SCEA	Available	October
Developer	Climax Group/Sony Santa Monica	Online/Multi	8 player multi	ESRB Rating	E

ATV Off Road Fury 4

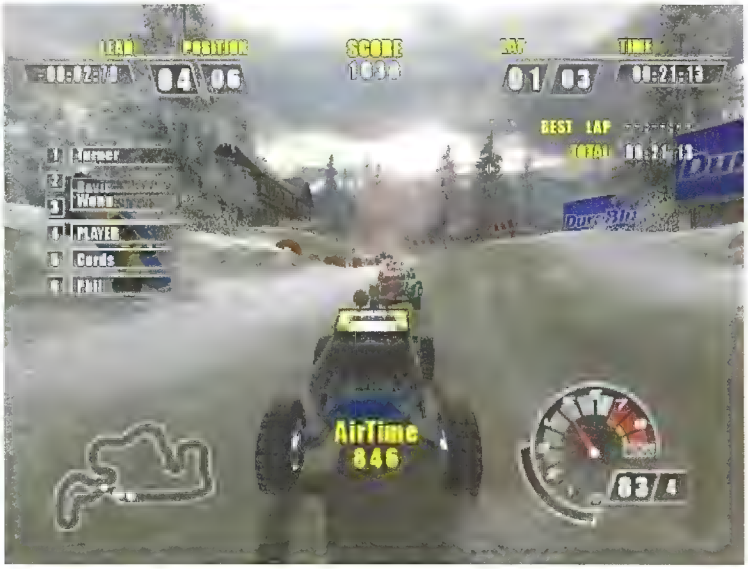
words **Dave Halverson**



> "All well and good, but where this game really shines—beams even—is on the track."

Like the rest of the PS2 playing populous I thought the Off Road Fury series on PS2 had run its course and exploded into a fiery mass, especially after the disappointing second sequel. I mean, 3 ATV games? Anyone? The series began with a genre busting gem of a racer from Rainbow Studios who seemingly hard wired their racing engine into the guts of the PS2 for the first two games before Climax took over and well, they were no Rainbow; or at least they didn't used to be. ATV ORF 3 was a descent game, but, the series mojo was MIA.

So it was with much trepidation I approached ATV ORF 4, until I realized that Climax had made the same deal with the devil that Rainbow once did. You gotta give it up to Beelzebub; he drives a good bargain. Anyone ever seen a soul? If only they'd have made it before they finished Sudeki... Anyway, ATV ORF 4 is hot stuff. The game features Single Event (Supercross, Rallycross, Nationals, and Freestyle), Story, and Classic modes--the story being where the meat is. This is where you get to create your character (male or female) tweak your ride and set out to begin the process of hitting milestones to progress the story, going from a lowly amateur with some stickers to your name to a fully sponsored superstar. You can choose from 4 vehicles for each venue (ATV, Bike, Truck, or Buggy) and then off you go to make a name for yourself. The more you win the higher the accolades and booty, and there's nothing in the game that you can't customize.



All well and good, but where this game really shines—beams even—is on the track. Two words: bar cam. Both the ATV's and Bikes feature the best current-gen behind the bars camera to date, providing the closest thing to real racing on the PS2. And if that gives you vertigo there are 4 others to choose from. All of the vehicles handle brilliantly (MX bikes are little tricky at first) and the course design is the best yet for any off-road PS2 racer. This game easily eclipses Rainbow's original. My only complaint is the pull-back-and-flick-forward preload system. It might work if there was a visual cue but no such luck. A minor quibble amidst a great racer. **play**

ATV Off Road Fury 4	score 8.5
+	Brilliant course design, awesome physics, great bar cam, deep story
–	Preload flick system kind blows, long load times

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System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	THQ	Available	October
Developer	Rainbow Studios	[illegible]	NA	ESRB Rating	E

Cars

Lightning strikes the 360

words **Dave Halverson**

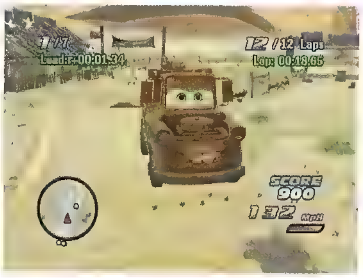
I can't get enough of Cars on 360. I had a great time with the Xbox game but it still ended up on the pile, while this version remains perched next to my console ready for action.

The first true CarPG, Cars is essentially a slice of life—Lightning McQueen's life. Having returned to Radiator Springs after his valiant display at the Piston Cup, Lightning now passes the days and nights away completing tasks for his newfound friends, playing mini-games, and partaking in challenges; competing in an ever-burgeoning series of races to earn points for the next leg of the new Piston Cup season.

What's so alluring about the whole thing is that as a mission-based game on wheels, it's a blast, but Rainbow Studios put just as much emphasis on finishing what Pixar started; fleshing out the landscape around Radiator Springs, creating a massive playground for McQueen to explore freely collecting booty and generally having a good time. There's a real sense of freedom and frolic on tap here that makes this the perfect casual game, and the cast—A-listers through and through—seem genuinely happy reprising their roles in the game.

Once you get back to business you'll find that the best NASCAR racing there is just got a whole lot better. The dicey AI and super cool pit-stop mini-games actually make driving in a circle fun, and on 360 the venues look absolutely stunning. There are some drop-dead gorgeous races in and around Radiator Springs late in the game too; even Mater gets into the act.

Loaded with play modes, unlockables, an ultra-user-friendly learning curve (it's pretty much super-easy for the first few hours) and a dusty ol' soundtrack that always puts a grin on your face, Cars is gaming's ultimate comfort food. **play**



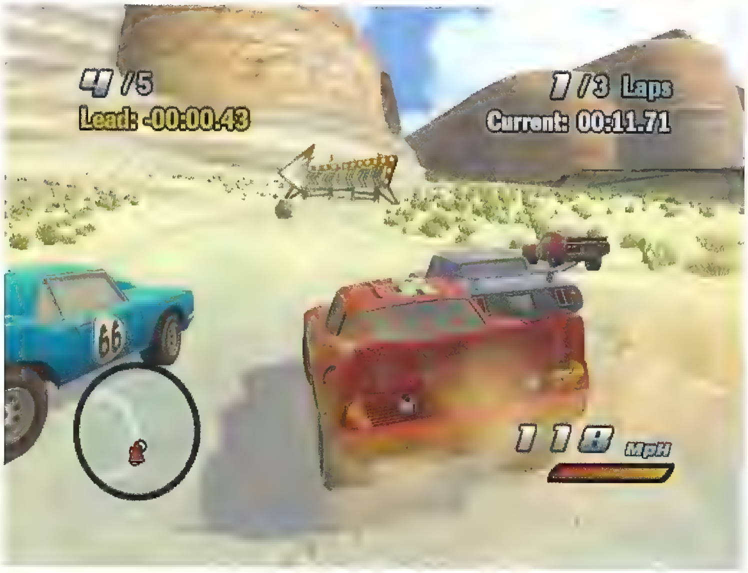
Cars

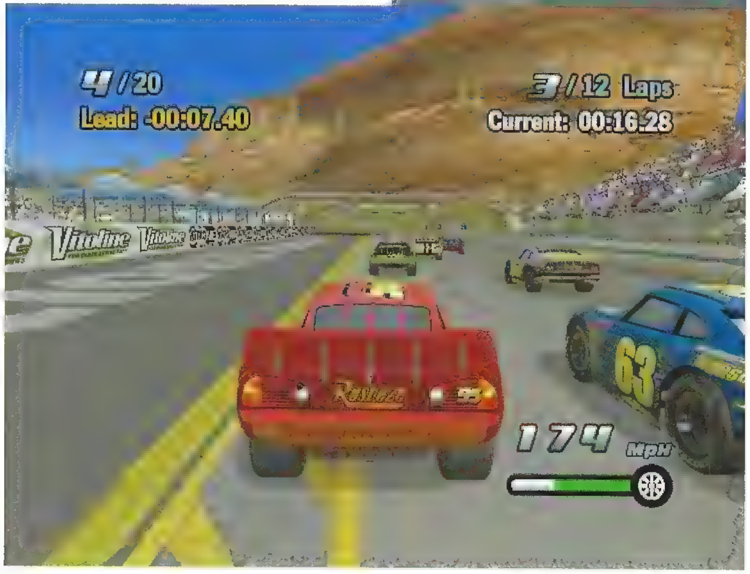
score 8.0

+	Scads of off-road races, mini-games, NASCAR, and free roaming. A-list actors and talking cars! Gorgeous car models
-	It's too easy for too long, shrubs and whatnot pop-in (I don't get that) and it's a port.

> "The first true CarPG, Cars is essentially a slice of life—Lightning McQueen's life."

"Rolling Staaart...Daytona" ... Er, no wait, Piston Cup! "Ka-Chow!"





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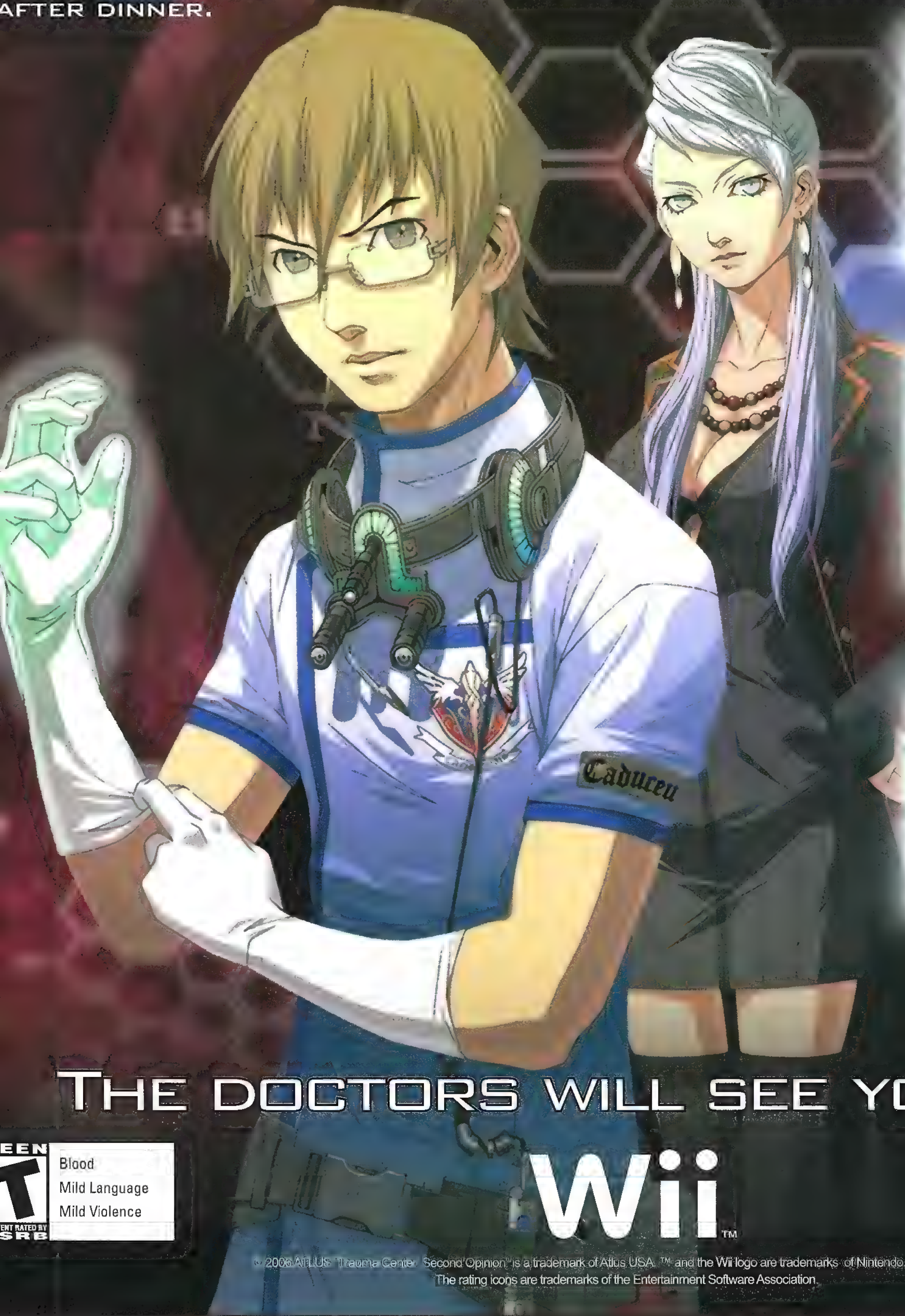
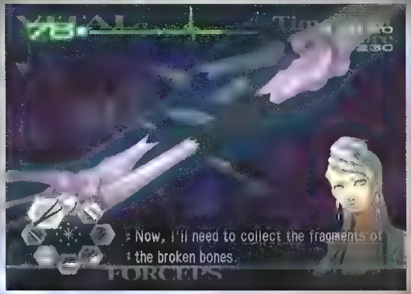
SECOND OPINION

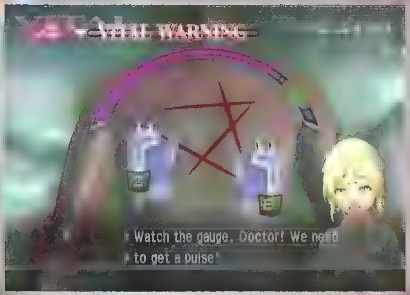
IT TAKES YEARS OF MEDICAL SCHOOL, RESIDENCY, AND CLINIC DUTY TO BECOME A SURGEON AND SAVE LIVES. OR, YOU COULD SKIP ALL THAT AND PUT IN A FEW HOURS AFTER DINNER.





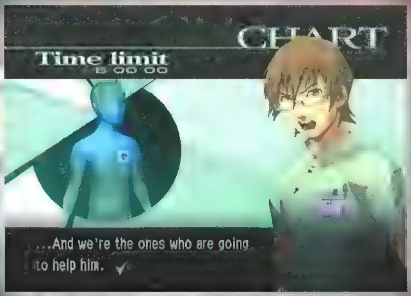
Now, I'll need to collect the fragments of the broken bones.

ENHANCED PLAY WITH DIFFICULTY MODES...



Watch the gauge, Doctor! We need to get a pulse!

NEW SURGICAL IMPLEMENTS LIKE THE DEFIBRILLATOR...



...And we're the ones who are going to help him.

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WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007

"For WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007, THQ and Yuke's came up with a much better idea in an analog stick-based grappling scheme"

When it comes crashing down, and it hurts inside . . .

words **Greg Orlando**

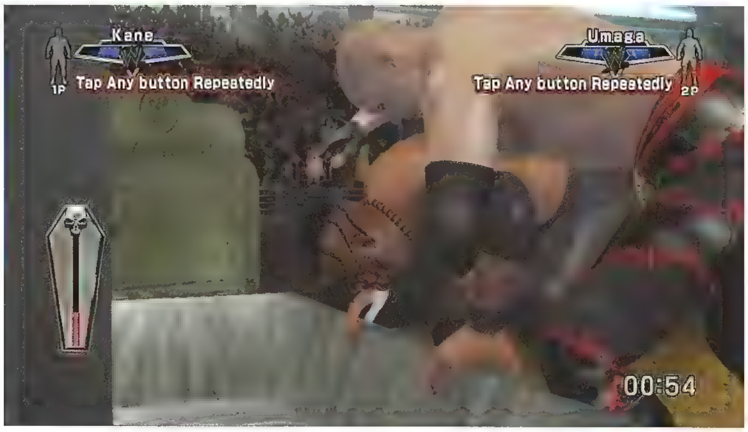
Once upon a time, THQ's idea for a great wrestling game had players, as World Wrestling Entertainment grapplers, battling construction workers, security officers, and WWE employees in shopping malls, parking lots, and backstage areas. And if it seemed odd that wrestlers were charged with destroying someone's car or tossing Johnny Lunchbucket and Joe Punchclock off the top of a construction site, well, that's because it was very, very weird, by which it is meant it was as stupid as a bag full of hammers.

For WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007, THQ and Yuke's came up with a much better idea in an analog stick-based grappling scheme. The idea is not wholly new; a variant of this system was tried in WWE Smackdown: Here Comes the Pain and discarded for WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2006. Its return is welcome here, and the expansions the developers have made to it allow for a lot of creativity in terms of moves that can be performed.

Basic moves can be performed with the right analog stick. For more powerful grapples, a combination of the Xbox 360 controller's right bumper and analog stick must be used. Once in a strong grapple, the game opens up a wealth of options to players in the form of branching move sets and special attacks linked to the game's environments. This means that there are setup positions for different moves: an over-the-shoulder fireman's carry can segue into a backbreaker or a chokeslam. Inverting a wrestler could lead to a suplex; an ignominious, stomach-first drop across the top rope, or a powerbomb. It's also possible to hold a wrestler within a maneuver, keeping him aloft in the air to receive a boost in momentum.

Game environments can be exploited to great effect. It's possible to take the padding off the ring's turnbuckle and then smash some fool's head into it repeatedly or rake his eyes across the top rope. Outside the ring, it's possible to strangle opponents with cords, toss wrestlers into speakers, or hammer their brains with television monitors. These environmental hotspots, as the game calls them, add a lot of depth to matches, but come with a very real caveat: each of these specialty maneuvers drains a wrestler's stamina when he performs it. It's fairly ridiculous, say, to think the Undertaker might exhaust himself shaking the top rope while the hapless Trevor Murdoch is straddling it, or that Shawn Michaels might tire while bouncing Batista's head into the steel steps.

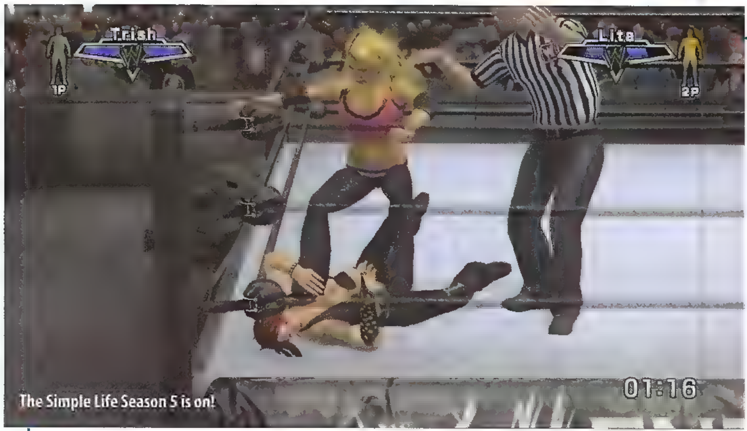
There's still some work to be done in terms of the game's graphics and the movement of the wrestlers. As it stands now, combatants often appear as sweaty plastic robotoids with jerky movements. Yet this is a minor issue, one easily waved off in light of 2007's improvements, its wealth of match types, and a revamped general manager's mode wherein players can build their own TV show and compete for ratings. To the point: pain has rarely been so pleasurable. Rumble on, spandex warriors. **play**



WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007

score 9.0

+	New control scheme, fun environmental interactions, good create-a-character and general manager modes
–	Now entering the ring: Sweaty Plastic Robotoids!, wrestler fatigue system often metes out disproportionate fatigue to a wrestler's actions



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System(s)	PlayStation 2, GC, PC, Xbox 360 (reviewed)	Publisher	Eidos	Available	November
Developer	Traveller's Tales	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E

Bionicle Heroes

No assembly required

words [illegible]

With Viva Piñata already making waves on Saturday morning TV, it's clear that Microsoft is finally taking E games seriously, which is good news for two reasons: There are a ton of kids on the planet and their entertainment is the best stuff on TV. Eidos's Bionicle Heroes plays right into this long overdue piece of the next-generation puzzle. Don't know what a "Bionicle" is? It's a really mean breed of Lego with a universe so big it consumes a ten-foot stretch of aisle at Toys 'R' Us, complete with three direct to DVD films that'll pin any pre-teen to the sofa for a 90-minute drool-inducing CG coma. They're also a great way to relieve stress. Screw yoga; there's nothing quite as Zen as assembling a high-line Bionicle.

But how do you bequeath plastic a soul to the level that you'd ever want to control one in a video game? Easy: Just call Traveller's Tales. For over 2 decades they've been gaming's most consistent shop, quietly pumping out quality franchise games 18 months or so at a time like clockwork. Mickey Mania, Toy Story 2, A Bug's Life, Lego Star Wars, Crash Bandicoot, Finding Nemo, Chronicles of Narnia…they're eternally booked solid for good reason.

For Bionicle they've crafted an over-the-shoulder-action-shooter with a heavy and skillfully deployed emphasis on the brand. I wish more developers would embrace this point of view, as opposed to the floating torso FPS. You still get that FPS intimacy but with the added satisfaction of seeing your character, which is vital in this case. The game pits Inika vs. Piraka in a struggle for the Mask of Life which may not sound like much but for a toy line the story runs surprisingly deep. Aside from the shooting, which is executed beautifully, toggling between model types on the fly, there are Lego pieces strewn throughout which can be fashioned into all manner of machinery. Holding the designated button with the required Bionicle, you can assemble constructs galore, from boats, to bridges, to cranes and conveyances…and so on. It's a crafty bit of gaming for sure. There's the leveling up to be had too, along with heavy exploration. Collecting Lego pieces allows you to rig your Inika specialists to the gills, then return to previously played areas to penetrate deeper into each level a la Metroid. And you kill it, you own it. There's a cavern in here reserved for viewing your stockpile, along with enough mini-games to keep you busy until the 720 comes out. **play**

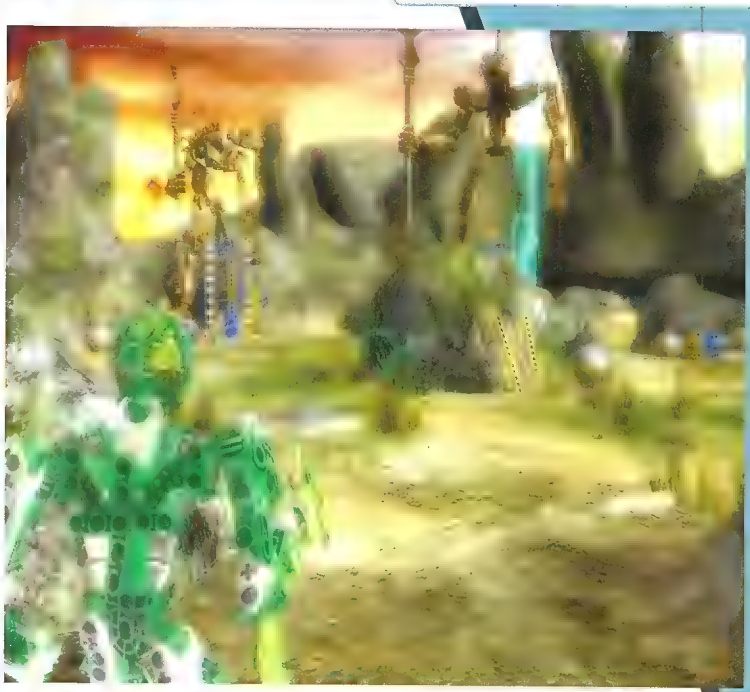
Bionicle Heroes

score 7.0

+	Reps the brand perfectly, quality shooting, unique point of view, lots of exploration, long
-	It's a beauty on 360 but still a port so it could be better.

> "I wish more developers would embrace this point of view, as opposed to the floating torso…"

Give it 10 more years...Lego will run the country.



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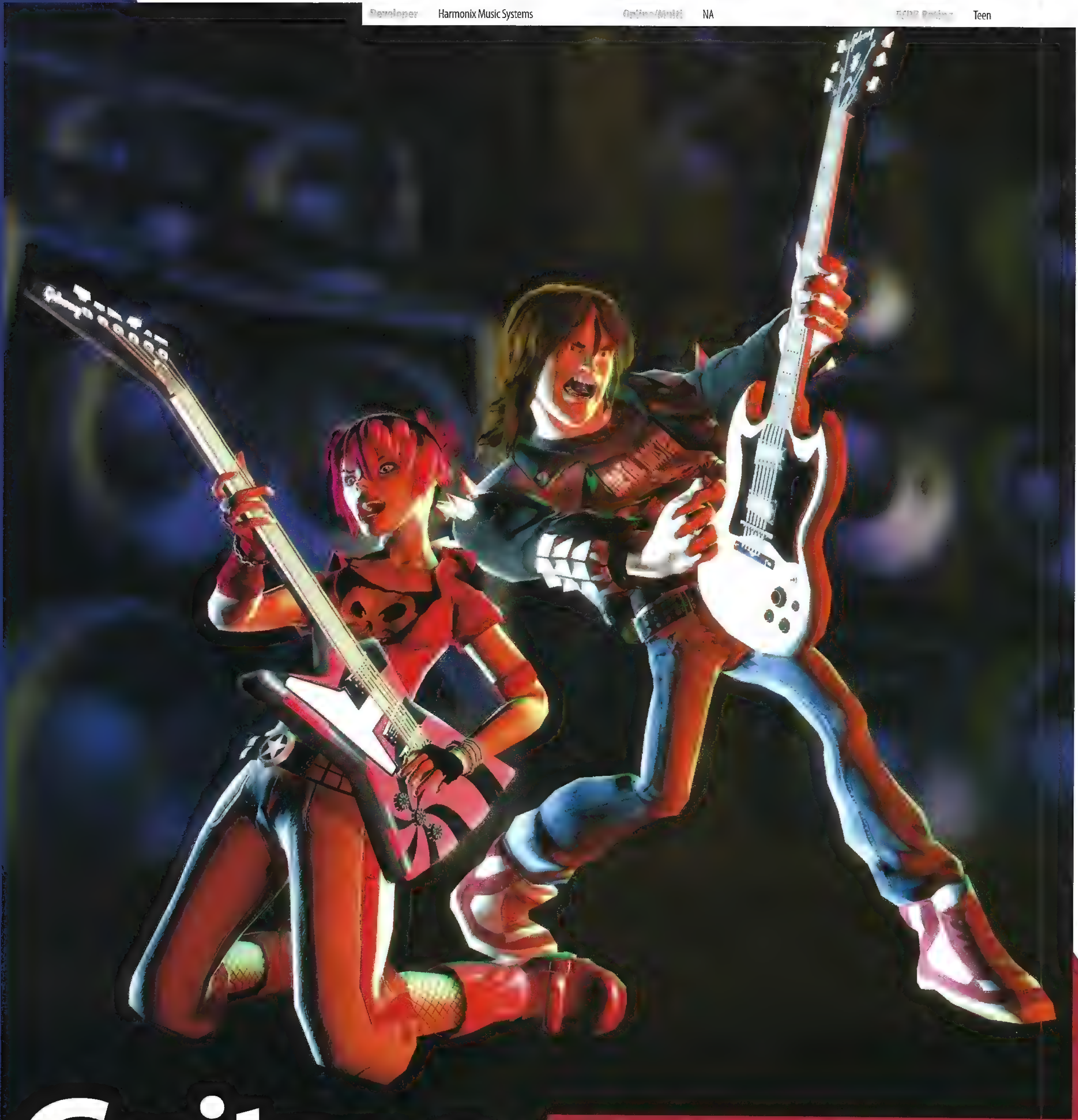
System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	RedOctane/Activision	Available	November 7
Developer	Harmonix Music Systems	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	Teen



Guitar Hero 2

Royal rumble

words: **Heather Campbell**

Let's face it. Most of us were getting tired of Rhythm Action Games. By the time Dance Dance Revolution Final Mix Universe Saga the Fifth Stage Ultimate Beat Drum Drum had come out, we had already heard enough of the genre to live out the rest of our lives on mute. We'd beaten enough Donkey Konga, we'd hopped on enough glowing arrows, we'd shaken our asses till they were sore. Some of us were desperate for the Silence Inaction Game, where the screen was an infinite scrolling barren line with no shimmering moguls in site. A game where you watched white noise and didn't tap/dance/jump in time to anything. We thought we needed a break. We were wrong.

When Guitar Hero came out this time last year, it was immediately cool to press buttons to music again. Taking a cue from Konami's Guitar Freaks, Guitar Hero improved on the formula until it felt new. A whole new group of gamers

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ROCK

"Once more, nerds in their bathrobes can engage the culture of cool."

She's good, but Lucas Rossi...he's got the gift.

pulled out their plastic guitars and fell in love with the candy colored frets. We wailed, we soared, and sometimes, we sang along in secret.

So, it's a year later, and the champions at Harmonix have heard our suggestions, and have presented us with another round of awesome. Once more, nerds in their bathrobes can engage the culture of cool. The name Guitar Hero could not be more appropriate; John Tam, executive producer of the game, is a hero indeed. We can pretend to be the violent, wild, raw rock gods that everyone, everywhere, wants to be ... even if your mastery of the SG is limited to easy mode.

What's changed? What's better? For starters, there are now three styles of guitar-play ready for us wanna-be jam members; Lead, Rhythm and Bass. Two players can cut chords cooperatively or competitively, sharing the song or having a synchronized battle of the bands. When assuming the identity of a Guitar Hero, gamers now have a choice between eight returning idols or three new ones. And in an optimistic take on the music industry, bands work their way up from high school gym stages to massive, sold out arenas.

And what a thrill it is, the first time the camera pans down from hanging stage lights to your adrenaline-filled, sweat-stained avatar. The lights dim, and the pressure is on. Never before have I felt so terrible screwing up as I do during GH2. It's stressful to miss notes in your favorite songs; not only are you letting down your virtual (or very tangible) audience, but you're betraying the memory of the melody. Missing a note in Sweet Child 'O Mine is blasphemy, and you're the one taking the song's name in vain. Skip a step in DDR, and you're just breaking a combo. Stutter a lick in GH2, and you've ruined rock itself.

Thankfully, the learning curve in Hero 2 is gentle, and even beginners can shred through a chart-topper with just a little practice. Building on a steady set foundation, fret-gnashing gamers can pull of solid, satisfying songs in little-to-no time.

Speaking of great songs, Guitar Hero 2 has a lot of them. Sixty-four tracks grace this rock compilation, and everyone has a different favorite. From Nirvana to Van Halen, The Police to Rage Against the Machine, we all have something to play at the party. Even the guy you know who really likes Rush.

There are some players who will be disappointed at the near-identical execution that Guitar Hero 2 shares with its predecessor. Other than slight changes to chord mechanics that only obsessive-compulsives will notice, this is the same game with more features. Your old guitar even works with the title.

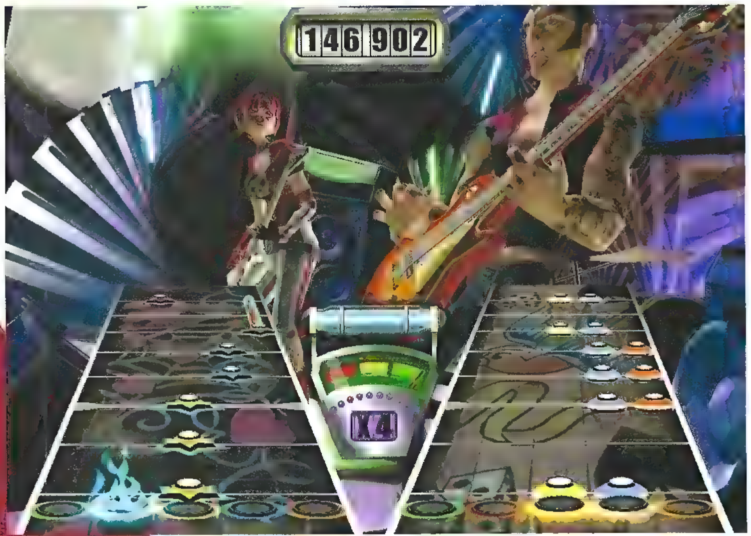
Usually, these similarities would be a disappointment. Here, they're welcome. Guitar Hero was a critical and commercial success. Rather than muck the formula, Harmonix has branched out to provide more gameplay. Great! What a workout you'll give the game, and your SG Guitar. True, you can slow down the speed of the hardest sections of songs in Practice Mode, but it seems more fun to struggle at the bottleneck of your inabilities until finally you find the zone and chainsaw through a previously impossible solo. Master the most ferocious combos, and you'll find yourself standing up in your living room, cheering till your cat hides under the couch.

Still, I can't stress it enough. You'll hate yourself every time you stumble in Guitar Hero 2. It's not like missing a jump in Sonic; no one is disappointed when you restart Green Hill Zone. But when you have to reset a song in GH2, you can feel the smoky disgust of Perry Farrell like ash on the back of your neck. **play**

Guitar Hero 2

score 9.0

+	Everyone can play, everyone can rock.
–	A lot like the first game. Wait. Is this a minus?



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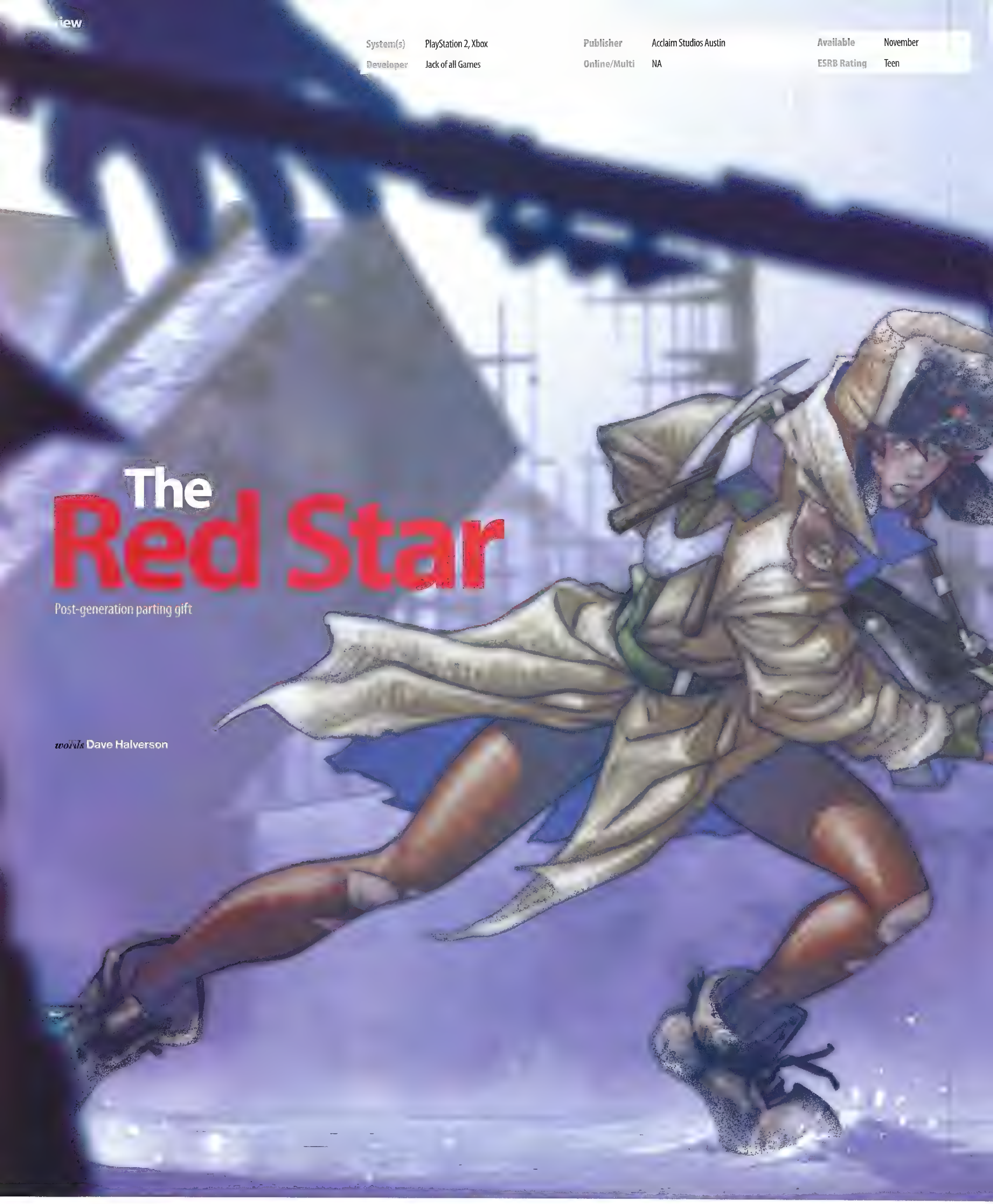
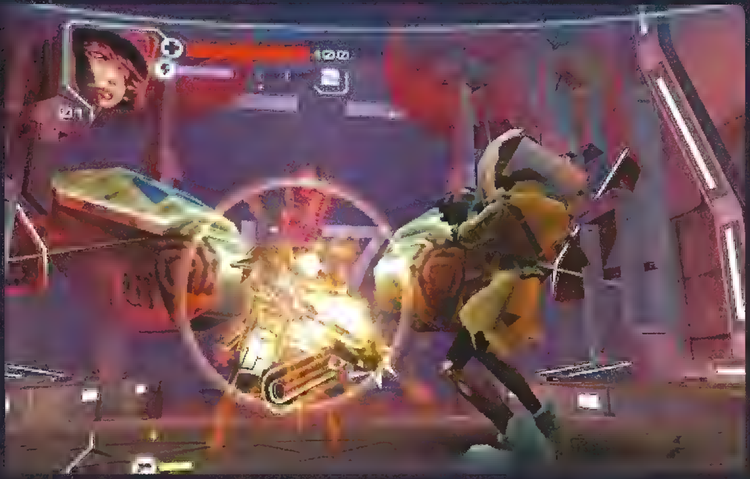
System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox	**Publisher**	Acclaim Studios Austin	**Available**	November
Developer	Jack of all Games	**Online/Multi**	NA	**ESRB Rating**	Teen



The Red Star

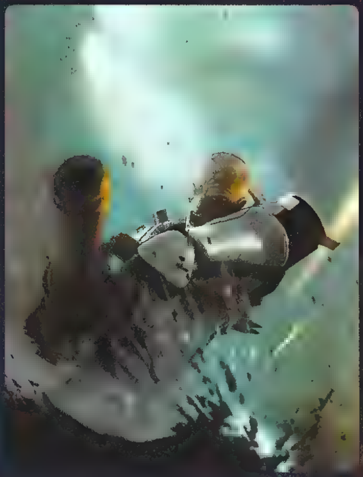
Post-generation parting gift

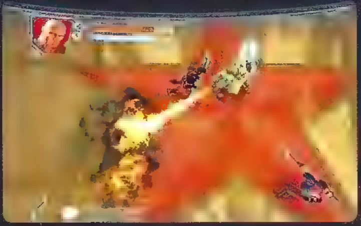
words **Dave Halverson**

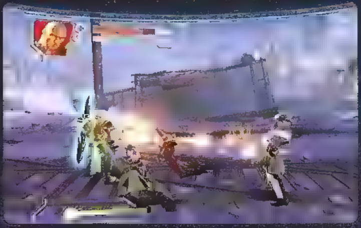


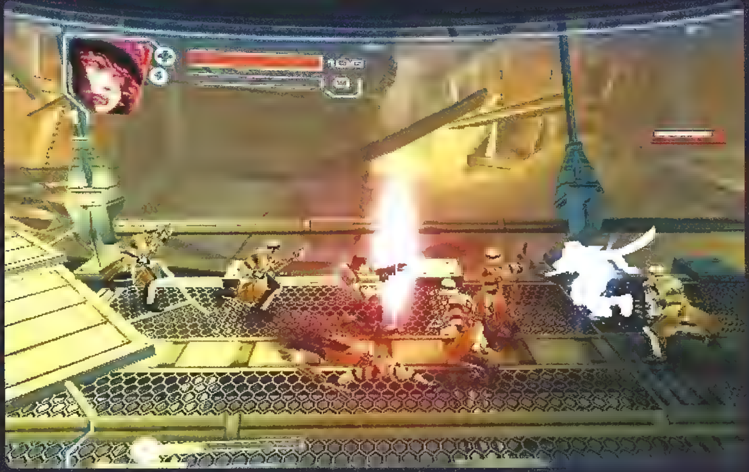
> " The Red Star is a game you play the first time to acclimate yourself and bask in the visual grandeur, than again to master..."

Makita doing what she does best...rebelling.









Pinch me...no, you better pierce me. It's hard enough to believe that I'm actually reviewing The Red Star again, but knowing that I actually played a tiny role in its resurgence is just ultra rewarding. Crap: What if you don't like it? Could this be just another Dave Rave? Hell yes it is.

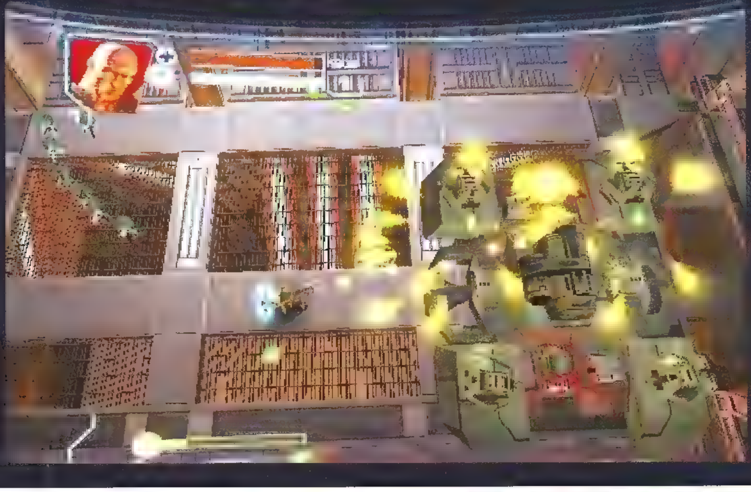
The last time this happened was when Tork got pitched by Microsoft; the difference being that it wasn't finished when the plug was pulled so the ending and final tuning suffered. The Red Star on the other hand was buttoned up nice and tight when Acclaim went belly up, and so nothing has been lost in translation. It remains the epitome of ground based action shooters. Had I known it was 100% for sure coming to Xbox (widescreen 480p is so tasty) it would have certainly breached my top 5 in last months "best of shooters" feature but that's water under the bridge.

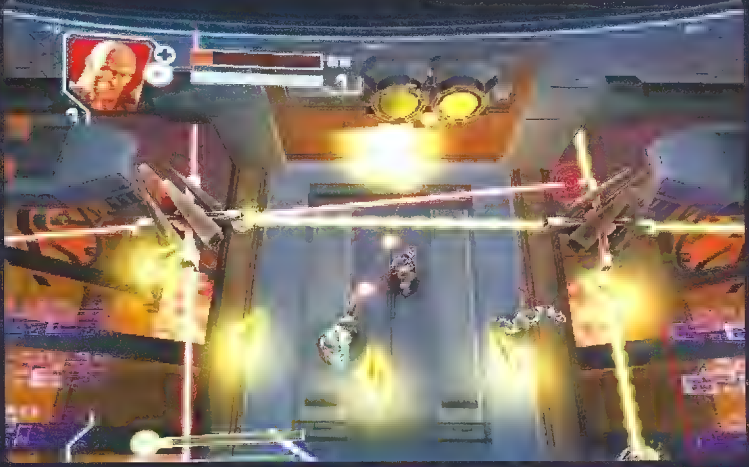
Having originally reviewed it for PS2, embarking on the Xbox version was pure delight. It all came rushing back the moment I saw the nimble Makita model in 480p, her petite frame gently undulating...ripped black tights, over sized ankle boots, war torn yellow dress, and Russian trooper hat; she is a beautifully designed and modeled character. Her walk, run, strafe, and back flip are the stuff of polygonal dreams. Few if any female leads move as well. Kyuzo; Red Guardsman and personal protector of Maya, (the 3rd member of the team) is selectable from the outset as well. One of the games calling cards is the dichotomy between the three. Makita is fast and limber but wields light arms; Kyuzo is slower but stronger and armed to the teeth, and Sorceress Major Maya uses psychic attacks, so playing through the game three times is not only rewarding but wholly diverse.

Conceived and drawn by Christian Gosset; one of the first designers hired by Lucasfilm to retro design the Star Wars Galaxy in 1993 (he also designed Darth Mauls wicked double edge lightsabre) The Red Star follows an epic battle in a world of militarized sorcery and monolithic technology, where—unknown to all but a few—the ghosts of old soldiers continue to fight alongside the living. Translation: Bad ass shooter with nuances galore where the better and smarter you play the easier your rebellion becomes. The action itself if somewhat of a hybrid, incorporating melee combat with gunplay; the main attraction on both counts being the execution. The hand to hand combat is visceral and tuned to perfection while the shooting is reminiscent of a ground based Treasure game. The interface is simple and eye catching, the dialogue straight out of a graphic novel and the music mood inducing. The Red Star is a game you play the first time to acclimate yourself and bask in the visual grandeur, than again to master, and then a few more times to master each character. Visually there's nothing like it—it is a purely artistic endeavor and as shooters go there's nothing here not to love. **play**

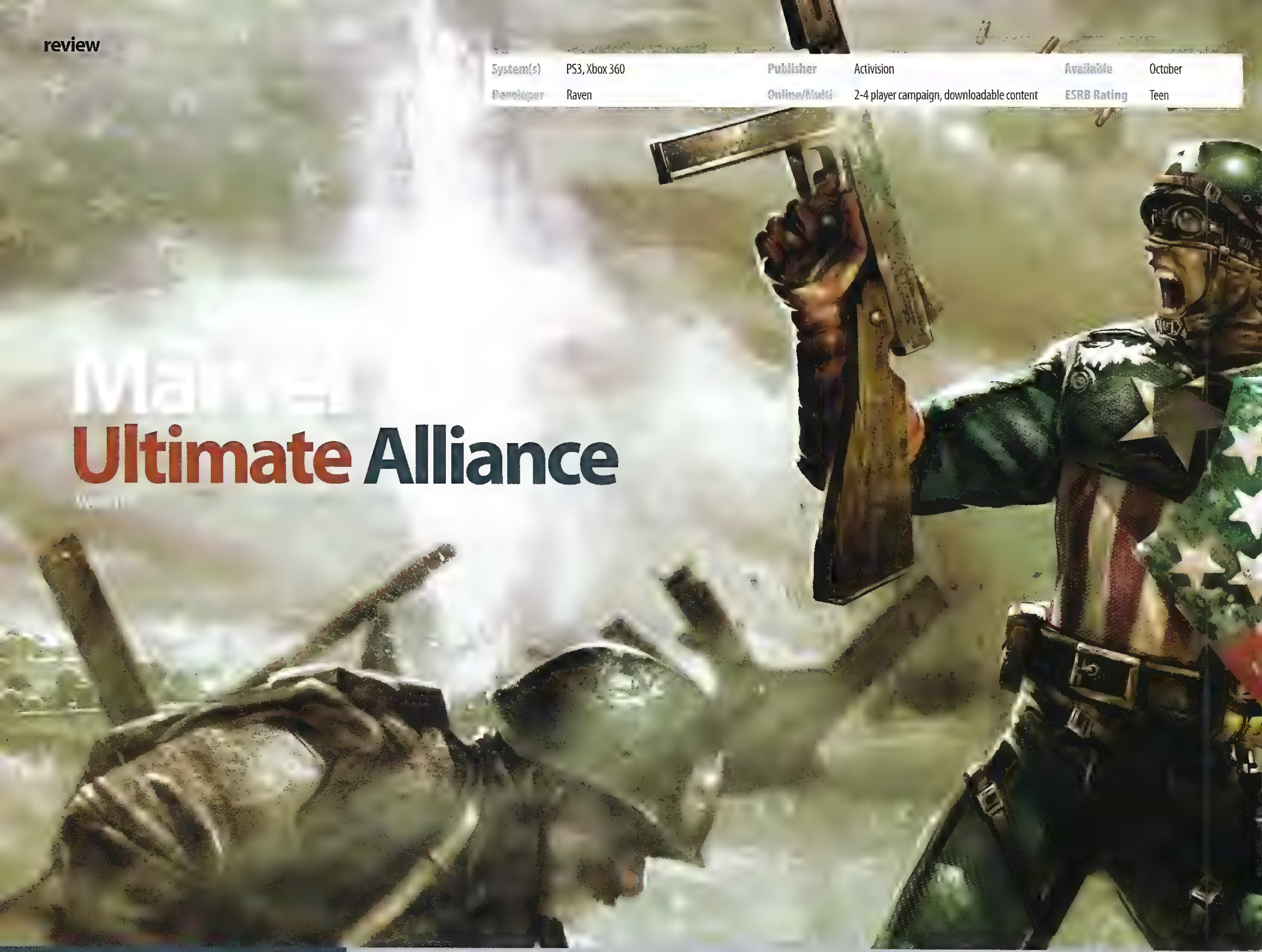
The Red Star score 9.0

+	An engaging polished shooter baked to perfection and frosted with gorgeous art
–	A little more side scrolling would have been nice...Gun [illegible]





System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360	Publisher	Activision	Available	October
Developer	Raven	Online/Multi	2-4 player campaign, downloadable content	ESRB Rating	Teen



Marvel Ultimate Alliance

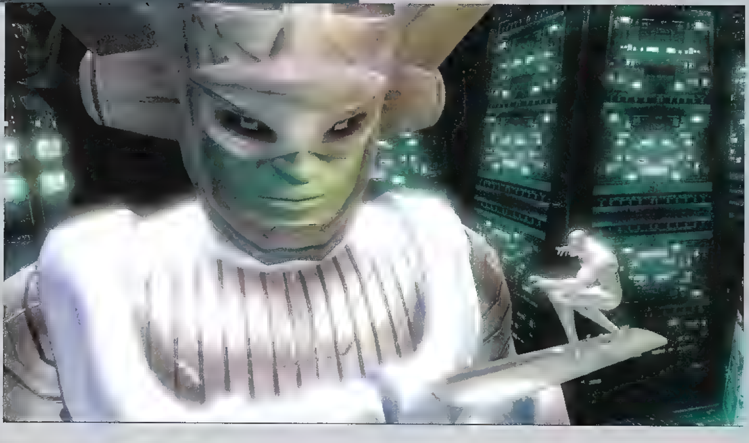
[illegible]

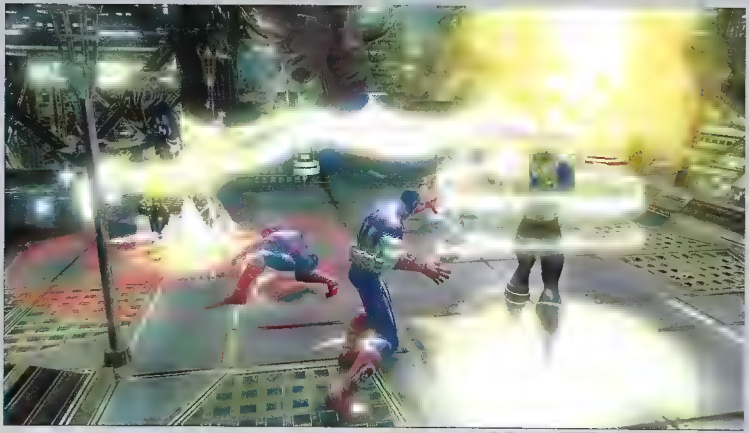
words **Dave Halverson**

There's only so much you can do with a top-down action game, so much is left to the execution. The main objective being to kill increasingly tough swarming bad guys on your way to a fearsome mid-bad-guy and then finally a really, really bad guy--aside from the odd switch or cinematic interlude there's not a whole lot you can do. It's like a Scion. Stock, it's a neat little car, but throw on all the doo-dads and it's ready for a long shot in the next installment of the Demolition Man. Such is the case with Marvel: Ultimate Alliance.

Having never cared for Raven's X-Men series, which features cel-shaded comic book heroes sandwiched into the mission-op mold, they've hooked me big time this time out. Not since the glory days of 16-bit when Legend of Oasis, Steamgear Mash, and Skeleton Krew burrowed into my psyche have I been this in love with top-down action.

Things get underway in predictable fashion—as your heroes of choice are instructed to go here and do this or that—but the execution is extraordinarily good. Not only do the characters and backgrounds look absolutely stunning, but as the game presses on we're introduced to a slick hub/HQ, and soon after underwater action in Atlantis that seals the deal. Thereafter and throughout, no matter the character you choose (and there's an impressive quiver to unlock), the moves come





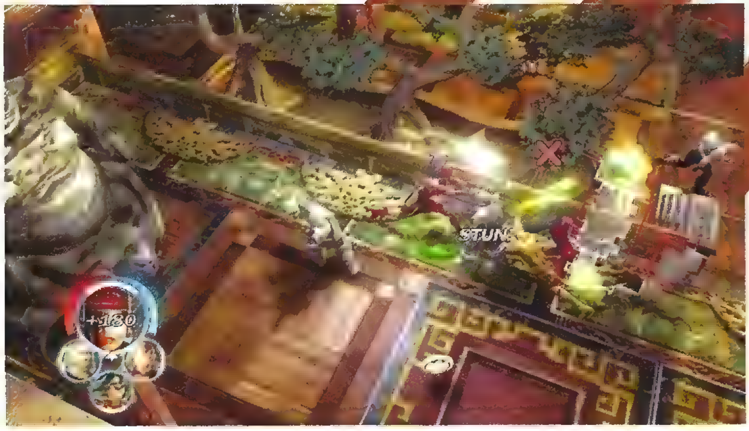
off with spectacular precision. The collision, when you're say, grabbing an opponent by the throat to pummel him profusely, is spot on, and each and every special comes off with ease. The writing a la KOTOR is also good; in fact, it actually made me care about Marvel characters enough to pick up a comic for the first time. Normally I stick to non-tights-wearing heroes but Elektra, Thing, Deadpool, Spider-Woman, Moon Knight, Ghost Rider, Blade…these are some seriously cool characters, and Ultimate lets you choose who you want and how you want them. Scoop up those coins because customization runs deep. Powers, outfits, gear…everything super about each combatant can be modded, and hot-swapping powers puts the gamut of their abilities at your fingertips. I reviewed the game on 360, and while I can't imagine it looking any better, the PS3 version supports 1080p progressive scan mode via HDMI, and makes use of the tilt control. Elsewhere the Wii version, which looks nothing like its next-gen counterparts, makes great use of the Nunchuck although I don't care if it peels off Elektra's leathers…I can't bear to look at it after gorging on all of this next-gen splendor.

Marvel: Ultimate Alliance

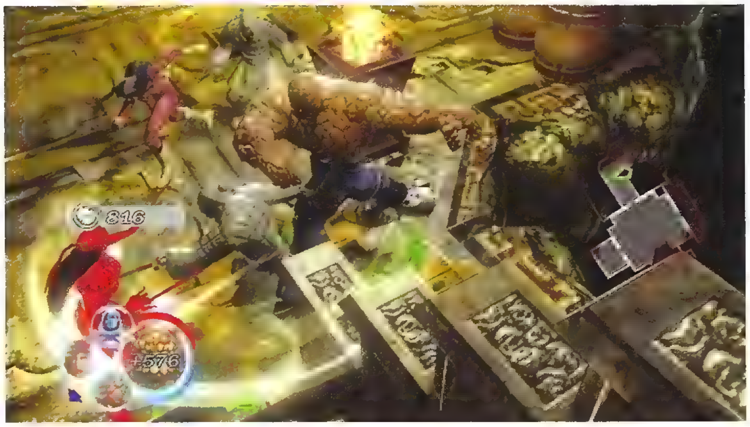
score 9.0

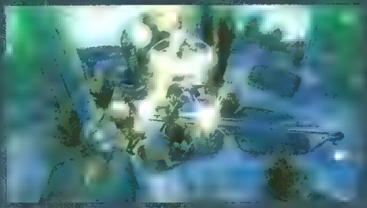
+ [illegible]

– [illegible]

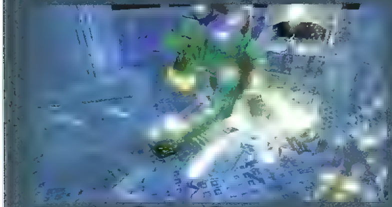


"The collision, when you're say, grabbing an opponent by the throat to pummel him profusely, is spot on..."





PlayStation 3



Xbox 360

Wii

Have some of this buttercup!

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Namco Bandai Games	Available	November 14
Developer	Cavia Inc.	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	Teen

Naruto Uzumaki Chronicles

Go ninja go ninja go

words **Eric L. Patterson**

When it comes time to make a licensed video game, some franchises end up being a bit typecast: Naruto for example. Making a fighter or ninja action game based on the series is an obvious choice, just like if you decided to make a game based on Old Yeller and settled on the light gun genre. Isn't there more that could be done with Naruto and company, though? That is the question Cavia Inc. poses with Naruto Uzumaki Chronicles, a game that dares to be different as it mixes in various elements of action games, beat-em-ups, and RPGs. How in the world do you combine all of those genres into one game? I'm glad you asked.

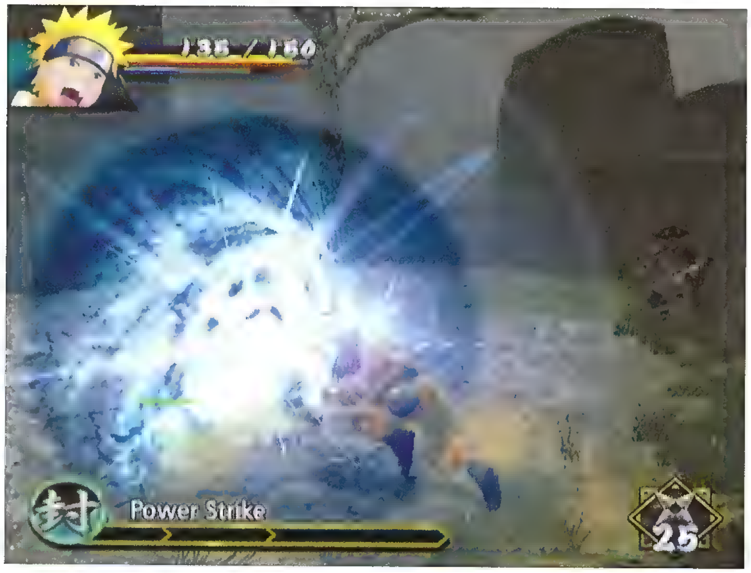
The core gameplay is mission based, and your progression through the game depends on the completion of each mission. Locations outside of your home territory Hidden Leaf Village must be reached by accessing the world map, but in general you can't actually visit the various villages and territories unless they are currently an active part of the storyline. However, as you travel through those points on the map in route to another area, a random encounter may suddenly appear, whisking you away in classic RPG fashion to a beautifully crafted battleground. By delving deeper into the game and unlocking new missions, additional sections of the map open up, but as they do you'll find yourself venturing farther and farther away from the game's one and only save point.

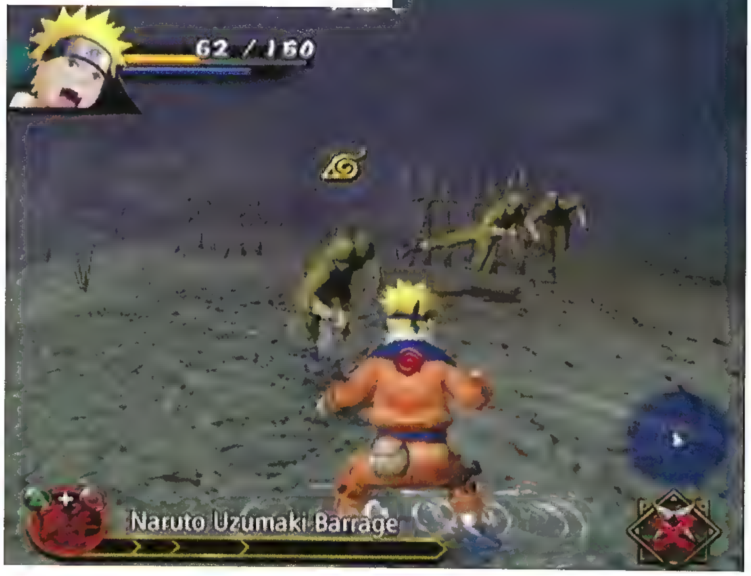
For a title so dependent on giving the player missions to complete, the tasks you are presented with are somewhat disappointing. The ideas behind the posted missions are fine, but what you as a player actually get to do ends up being, most times, one of two things: fighting one or more enemies, or fighting one or more enemies while defending a wooden pushcart. Missions do involve exploring cities for clues, talking to other characters, and so on, but all of that happens in (non-skippable) cut-scenes. I don't want to watch those things happening, I want to do them myself.

So what it comes down to is that the meat of Uzumaki Chronicles is the "action-beat-em-up" portion, and here the game has much to be proud of. You may

Incoming...time for some major jutsu action.

"A game that dares to be different as it mixes in various elements of action games, beat-em-ups, and RPGs."



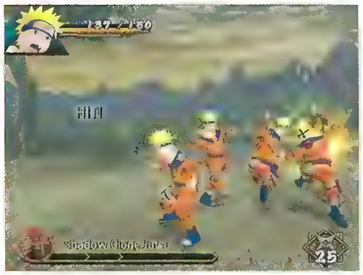


[illegible] is a very [illegible], but from there it's all real-time [illegible] of the fittest. Right from the start, Naruto can [illegible] combos, [illegible] his enemies, or pull off [illegible] such as the Shadow Clone and [illegible] jumps. Once defeated, your opponents will drop [illegible] which can be spent on [illegible] Skill Chips. [illegible] of various shapes and sizes, Skill Chips [illegible] together in a [illegible] called a Skill Plate, grant [illegible] everything from additional offensive and defensive prowess to unlocking more devastating attacks. Naruto doesn't [illegible]. Throughout the game, at key times, you can team him up with [illegible] characters [illegible] give Naruto a [illegible].

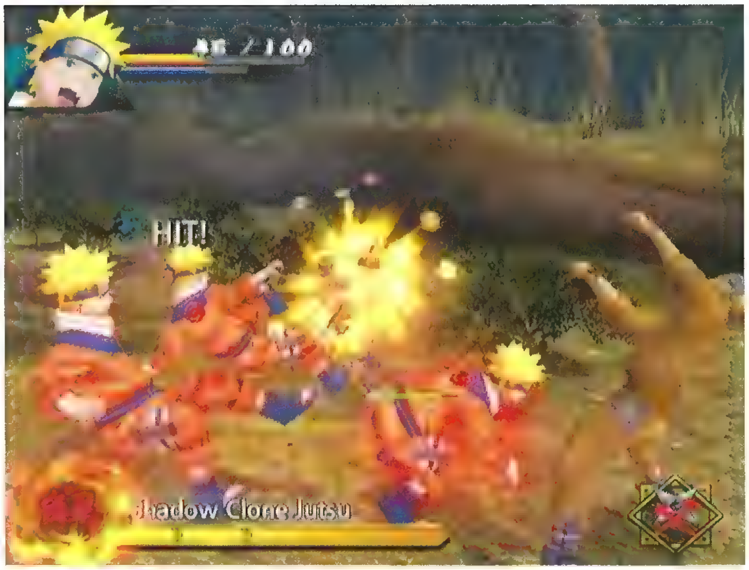
Naruto Uzumaki Chronicles is a game that [illegible] different [illegible] short in a few key areas. [illegible] and if Cavia produces a sequel that fixes up some of the rough spots, we could have a game even those unfamiliar with the Naruto mythos will be itching to try.

Naruto Uzumaki Chronicles score 7.5

+	I'm addicted to Konohamaru's mini game.
–	If I see that freakin' cart one more time...


137 / 150
HIT!
Shadow Clone Jutsu
25

Tanzaku Town


45 / 100
HIT!
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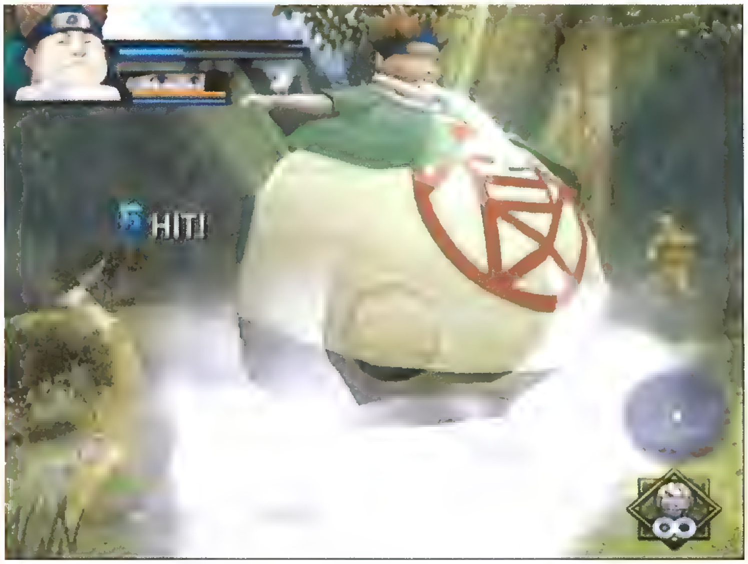
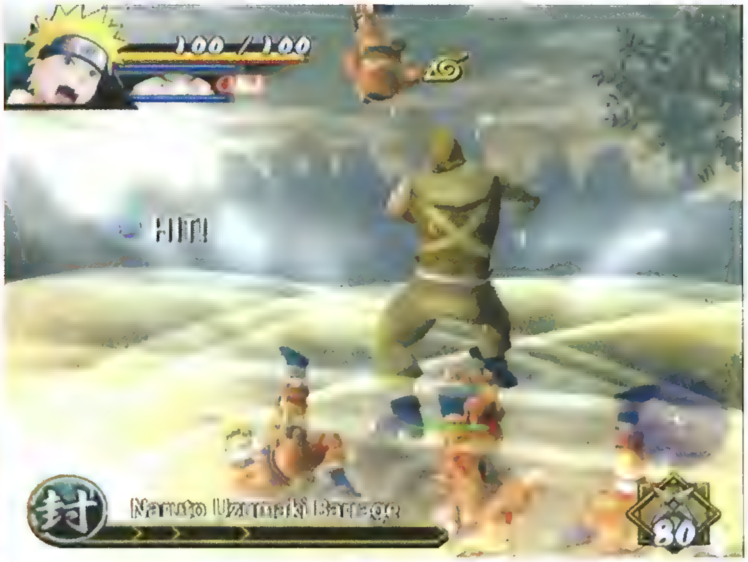


They're doing some amazing things with Lycra these days.


100 / 100
HIT!
封
Naruto Uzumaki Barrage
80

Mortal Kombat Armageddon

Killer Kombat, Kombat Karts and Konquest!

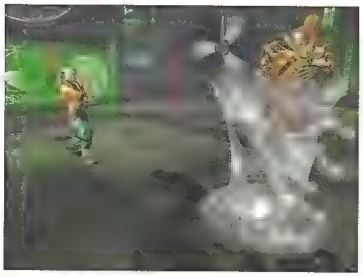
score 8.0

[illegible]	PlayStation 2, Xbox	[illegible]	1 8
[illegible]	Midway	[illegible]	Now
[illegible]	Midway	[illegible]	M

If this is Armageddon for Mortal Kombat, it certainly is a most delightful way to kill a series—at least until it rises like the phoenix for the next generation. Midway's loaded the game with over 60 fighters spanning the series' history and a brand-new create-a-fatality mode wherein players can enter a series of button combinations to perform multiple eviscerations and dismemberments on a single opponent.

Aside from the game's odious tendency to abuse the letter "K," Armageddon does a lot of things right here. It excises the dumb chess- and puzzle minigames of its predecessor Mortal Kombat: Deception, and replaces it with an equally stupid, yet oddly engaging, kart-racing challenge complete with gimmicky weapons, environmental fatalities, and 8-player online action. A new create-a-character mode has been tacked on, too, but the true winner in this madcap brawl is the single-player Konquest mode, which blends traditional Kombat fighting against opponents from the series with extended beat-'em-up sequences where the hero Taven must slaughter multiple opponents at a time. The weapon-based segments in Konquest are particularly awesome; they're wonderfully adrenaline-inducing and cathartic spectacles, allowing the hero to freeze and shatter opponents with ice weapons, or simply slice them to ribbons with a sword. **Greg Orlando**

"Aside from the game's odious tendency to abuse the letter "K," Armageddon does a lot of things right here"



Reservoir Dogs

This Dog doesn't hunt

score 3.5

[illegible]	PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC	Multi	NA
[illegible]	Volatile Games	Available	Now
[illegible]	Eidos	ESRB Rating	M

Joe Egan and Gerry Rafferty, bless their hearts, hit it right on head when they sang about "clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right" in their pop hit "Stuck in the Middle With You." Little did Misters Egan and Rafferty know their song would be included in Quentin Tarantino's movie Reservoir Dogs and, later, the Reservoir Dogs video game. And never would they imagine their line about clowns and jokers would be a prophetic vision of the experience offered by Dogs.

Tarantino is not dead, but he might be looking for a grave to roll over in. Dogs the video game is ugly in its presentation, flawed in its execution, and about as fun as tax forms. It offers an interesting mechanic in the ability to take hostages and order people around, and then makes sure that all players have to do is walk through a level exchanging hostages until the next loading screen. It tracks players' behaviors, ranking them either as a nonviolent professional, a psychopath, or a semi-violent criminal, and then makes the driving portion of the game so unbelievably hard to control that crash-free "professional" driving is like some distant pipe dream. All dogs go to heaven? Not hardly. This one rots somewhere else. **Greg Orlando**

"Tarantino is not dead, but he might be looking for a grave to roll over in"

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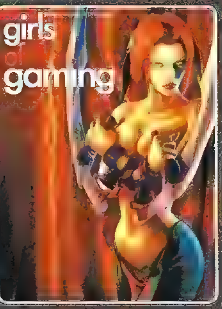

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System(s) Nintendo DS
Developer Capcom
Publisher Capcom
Online/Multi NA
Available January 2007
ESRB Rating T

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney

Justice for All

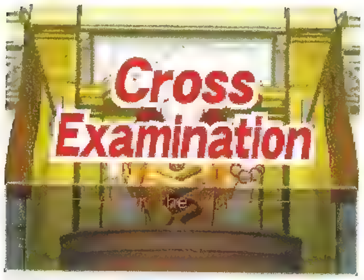
words **Greg Orlando**

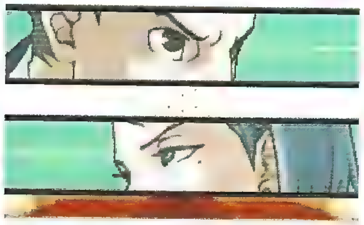
It's where I wanna go when I die

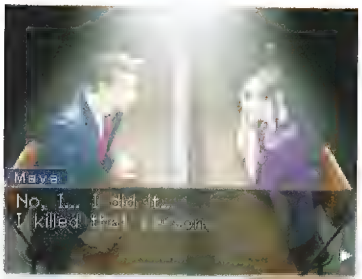
Phoenix Wright, ace attorney at law, is here to see that your rights are respected. And, in the case of the goofy Nintendo DS title Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Justice for All, your rights are as follows:

You have the right to scroll through long-winded passages of text. You have the right to wince at the banter between Wright and his assistant Maya, a woman who will comment on anything her boss sees, says, or does. You have the right to scream, "OBJECTION!" at the top of your lungs whenever the game unceasingly repeats the same ridiculous scenes ad nauseam. (The prosecuting attorney has a whip and likes to strike people with it? You don't say...) You have the right to dismiss the new psyche lock system, wherein Wright must shatter a witness' mental defenses to get to the truth, as junk. Because, you know, it is.

Mostly, you have the right to forgive Justice for All for its sins. Despite its noxious flaws, the game offers great amounts of logic-based puzzle solving, intrigue, and investigation. Inside the courtroom or out of it, Wright is the Perry Mason of video game attorneys: he never loses. Case closed.






Maya
No, I... I did it...
I killed that person.

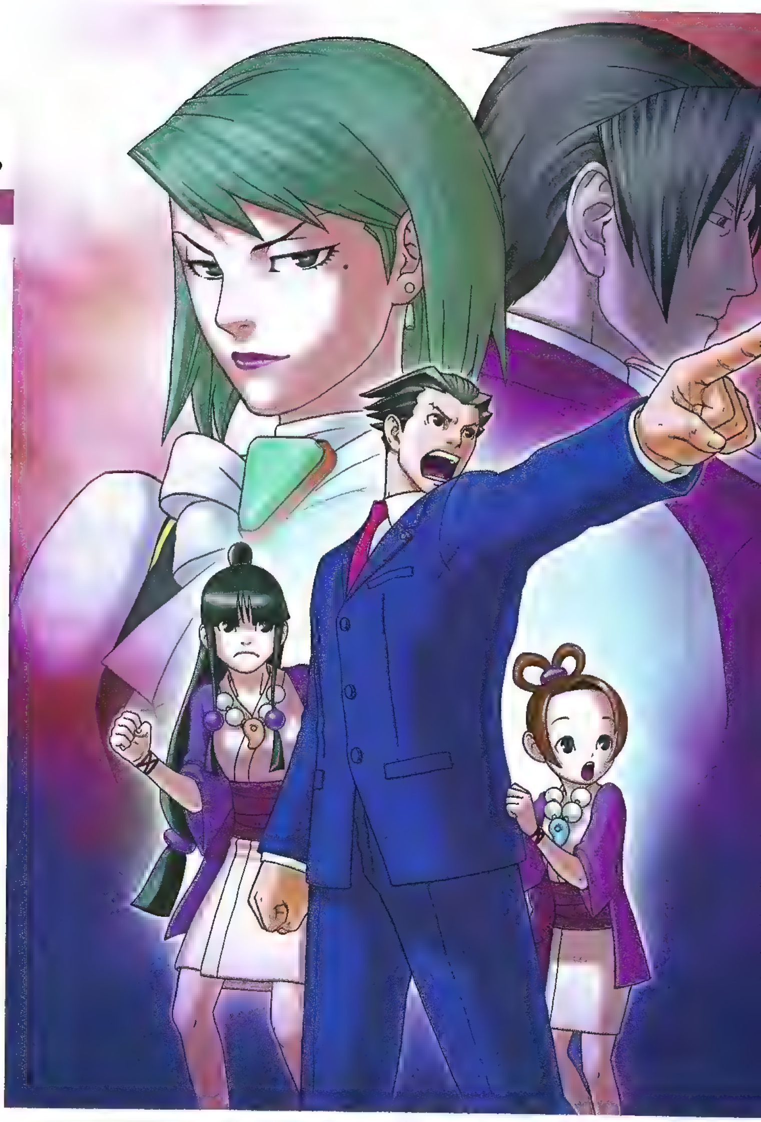
Court Record

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Justice for All

score 7.5

- + Still a case worth solving
- – [illegible] long bits of text

"Mostly, you have the right to forgive Justice for All for its sins. Despite its noxious flaws..."



I hated that car anyway.

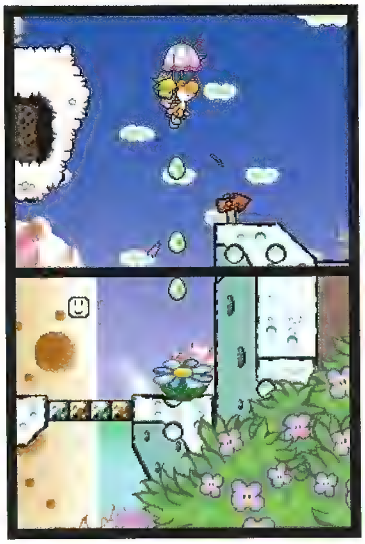
System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Nintendo	Available	November
Developer	Artoon	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E

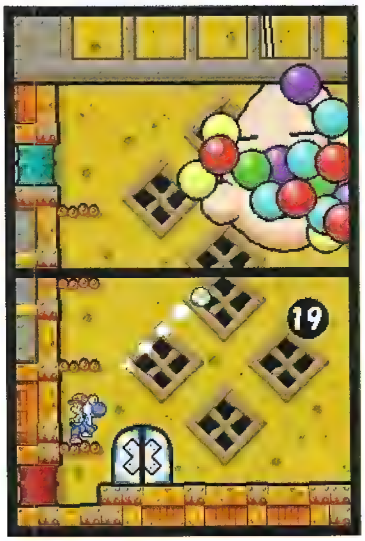
Yoshi's Island DS

words **Brady Fiechter**

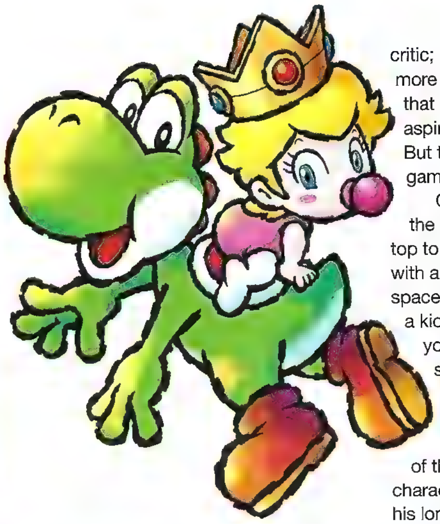
Few things nowadays can be called genuinely delightful, but not Yoshi's Island DS. It's also innocent and wonderfully childlike, in a way that the most charming Nintendo games often are.

But even when the most villainous of villains in Yoshi's Island DS carry a wide-eyed grin as they do their dirty work to send your hard-earned one-ups to the grave, the technique behind the game is what the hard-core grown up will find the most pleasure in mastering. Oscillating blocks cascade from above, spiked platforms flip and spin, bottomless falls tempt your ever step. This is high-level platforming, the classic definition of the word marking every increasingly demanding area as water levels rise to trap you, spring boards vault you to the next puzzle, cute little enemies float above and below and to the sides—sinister in pattern, but so charming in form.





Yoshi's crayon-sketched world is a lot like the original game on the Super Nintendo, its bright and creative spirit alive and flourishing in this most successful sequel. Taking over design duties this time out was Artoon, who it would seem studied the Mario series to great length. In fact, in some ways, Yoshi's Island DS could pass as a traditional Mario game—there's no denying safe familiarity here—as much as anything else. You grab lots of coins, pop down lots of pipes, concentrate on avoiding turtle shells and other Mario-inspired obstacles.



> "Yoshi's crayon-sketched world is a lot like the original game on the Super Nintendo, its bright and creative spirit alive and flourishing..."

The game just feels structured like every Mario before it, which isn't necessarily going to thrill the most demanding critic; it's that sign of studied emulation more than an inspired game all its own that can keep Yoshi's Island DS from aspiring to something truly special. But that's OK, when so much of the gameplay is huge entertainment.

Credit is due for the clever use of the dual screen. The action is displayed top to bottom, or bottom to top, switched with a tap of a button. With the visual space afforded a vertical dominance, it's a kick to see what's above and below you while you establish long-distance shots to grab power-ups or prepare for a coming trap or jump.

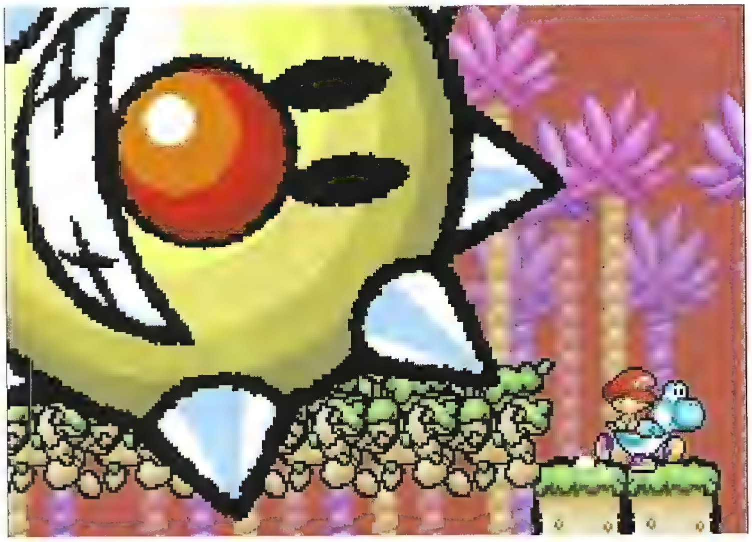
Like the original title, Yoshi's Island DS puts Yoshi in the center of the action, toting around a helper character as he sucks ups enemies with his long tongue and poops them out as ammunition-ready eggs. The big shift is that instead of singularly protecting baby Mario on the journey, Yoshi now gets to deal with baby Peach, Donkey Kong and Bowser. The characters all carry a unique skill, like Peach's umbrella to catch currents, Donkey Kong's climbing strength and Bowser's special magnet, which attracts coins and anything else magnetic. Switching back and forth between the babies might feel a little prosaic after a while—some of the level design feels forced in to accept the multiple-character setup. But few games can do everything right all the time, and at least Yoshi's Island DS does better than most.

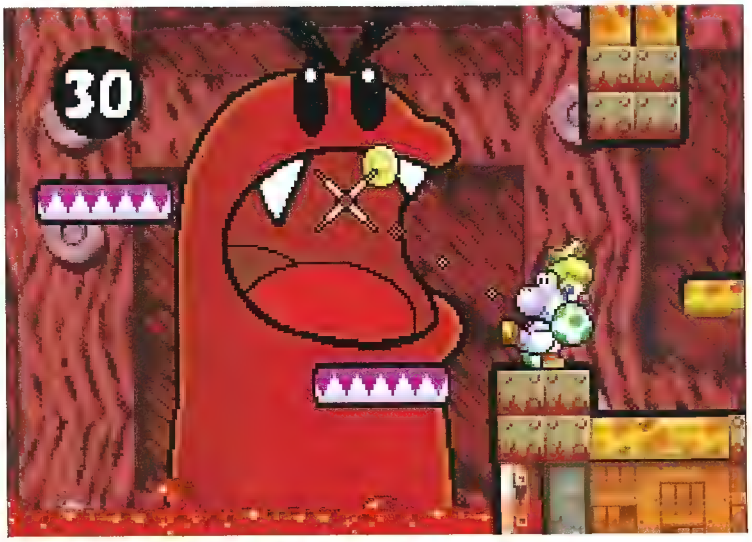
Yoshi's Island DS

score 9.0

+ A faithful sequel, colorful and filled with great play

– Definitely sticks to what's always worked for Nintendo





System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Koei	Available	October
Developer	iNiS	Online/Multi	1-2 players	ESRB Rating	E

Gitaroo Man Lives!

The original guitar hero

words **Eric L. Patterson**

Comedian Patton Oswald has a bit in one of his routines where he talks about heavy metal music videos from the 80's. The crux of the joke is that band members could rock so hard that, through the power of their music, they could actually alter the physical world around them. While guitar riffs doing amazing things like deflecting bullets or grilling cheese sandwiches is swell, would it be possible to actually harness that kind of power to protect the universe? One person, it seems, can do just that.

...okay, no, not Minmei from Macross. I was thinking of that *other* famous person destined to save the world with his song: Gitaroo Man. Long before Ouendan, it was his story that made Japanese development house iNiS famous among music game fans. The premise, as with every great rhythm game, sounds like something you'd dream when you're sick in bed with a temperature of 102°: young Japanese zero U-1 becomes intergalactic rock-god hero Gitaroo Man thanks to a space-age guitar called a Gitaroo, which he then uses to battle a host of bizarre villains in one-on-one music showdowns. By blending surreal characters and storylines with addictive gameplay and wacked-out Japanese songs spanning a variety of musical genres, Gitaroo Man became an unforgettable title that was loved by many.

Those who could find a copy, that is. The original PS2 release had a woefully low print run here in the States, making the PSP remake Gitaroo Man Lives! all the more welcome. iNiS has crafted an excellent port, one which feels equal to the PS2 version yet never comes off like a console game awkwardly stuffed into a portable. Gameplay remains mostly unchanged, as once again notes and markers must be hit in time with the music in order to power up your Gitaroo, unleash attacks, and then dodge the various counter attacks that are thrown your way. The offensive portions of the game require a lot of precise movements with the analog stick, so some worried the PSP's analog nub might not be up to the task. Thankfully, control is smooth as butter, so much so that it feels like this was the way the game was always meant to be played.

One gameplay aspect has changed, however: timing for button presses is noticeably easier now, especially when it comes to defending. This makes the game far more accessible for those who found the original too hard to enjoy, but the drop in difficulty could be a turn-off for longtime fans. My one other regret is that we're only given two new songs, both of which make up the foundation for the new co-op "Duet" mode. Neither of these factors will make a difference if you've never owned the game before, and if you haven't, then unless you hate games that are fun and enjoyable, Gitaroo Man Lives! should be in your PSP collection. If you need this *and* the original PS2 version, that's the question.

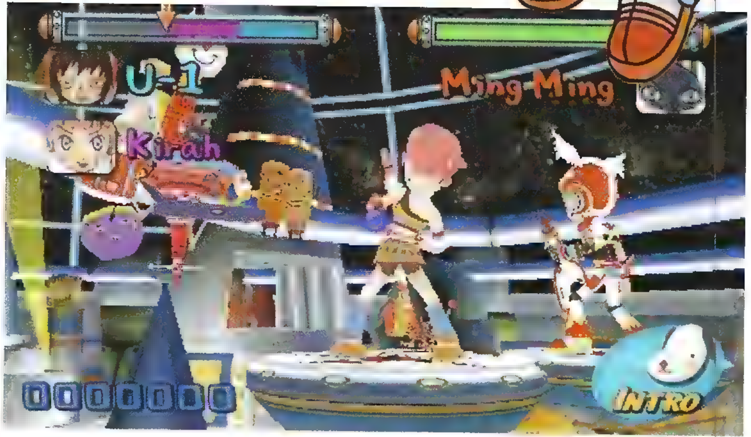
> "iNiS has crafted an excellent port, one which feels equal to the PS2 version"

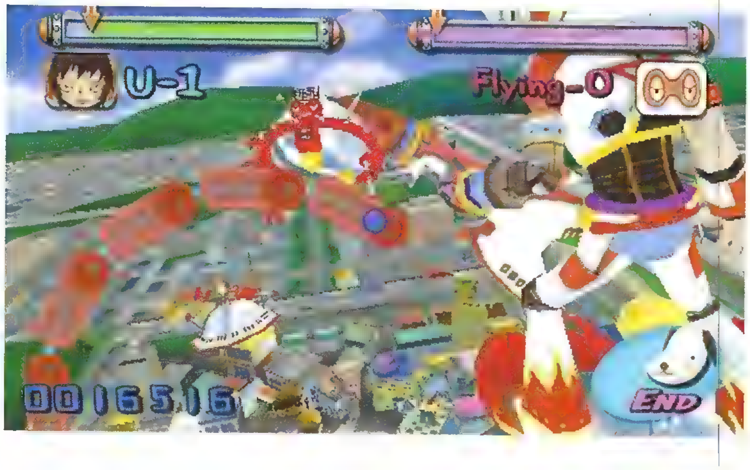
Gitaroo Man Lives!

score 8.5

+ Gitaroo Man now in convenient fun size.

− Adjustment to timing make things a bit too easy





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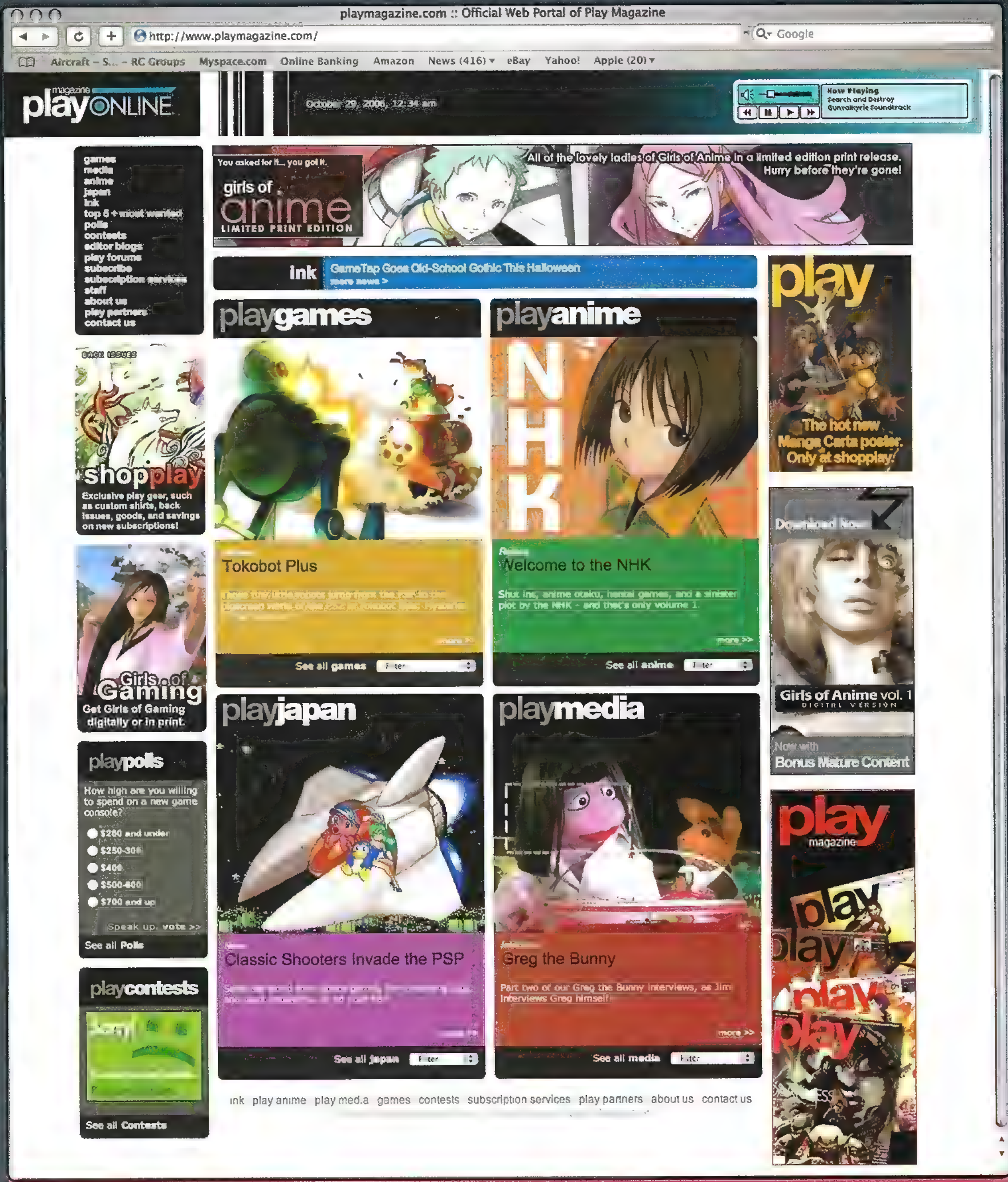
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Classic Shooters Invade the PSP

Greg the Bunny

Part two of our Greg the Bunny interviews, as Jim interviews Greg himself!

magazine playONLINE

Sonic the Hedgehog GBA

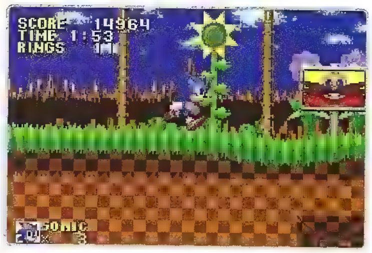
score 4.0

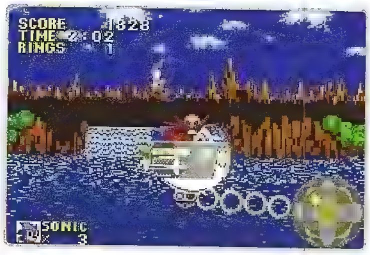
System	GBA	**Online/Multi**	NA
Developer	Sega	**Available**	Now
Publisher	Sega	**ESRB Rating**	E

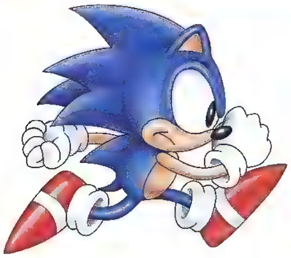
When I turned 15, a bully named Chuck DePaola gave me a public ass-kicking on the P.E. Field. It was a thoroughly crappy birthday, but compared to the beating Sonic is taking with this 15th anniversary GBA port of Sonic 1, I got off easy. I love the original Sonic, but this conversion is so horrible I can't recommend it to even the most passionate of Sonic fans.

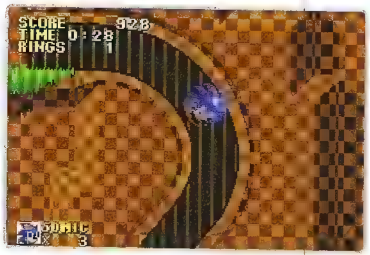
It doesn't take a trained eye to spot the flaws. About a third of the screen area of the Genesis original has been cut off, making Sonic much larger relative to the screen but rendering it nearly impossible to tell where you're going. Enemies will appear out of nowhere and you'll have no time to adjust to obstacles on your path, since the game was designed with the assumption that players would have a much wider view of the action. Cutting off a third of the screen is inexcusable, but it isn't hard to see why the developers resorted to it—the game can't even handle what little is left. There is grinding slowdown whenever more than a handful of objects appear on the screen, killing the sensation of speed that is Sonic's only real claim to fame.

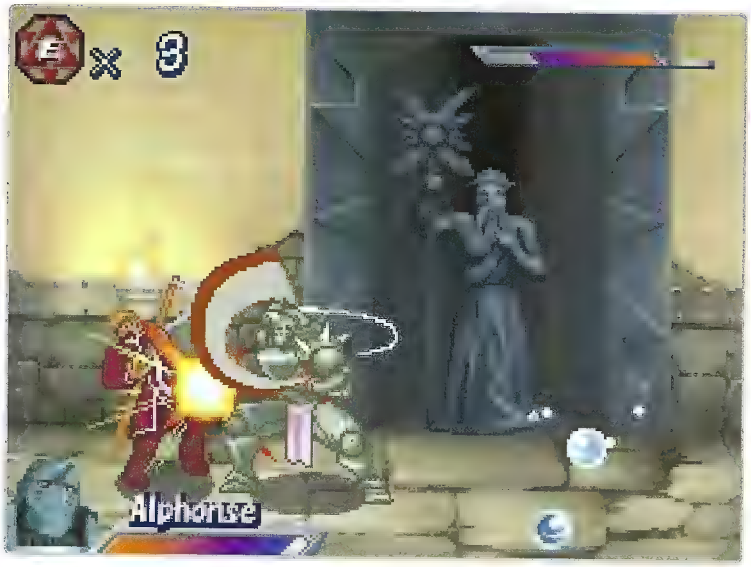
There are a few minor twists in the Anniversary Mode, such as the ability to use the Spin Dash that was introduced later in the series, but none of it matters when the fundamentals are so thoroughly screwed. **Casey Loe**

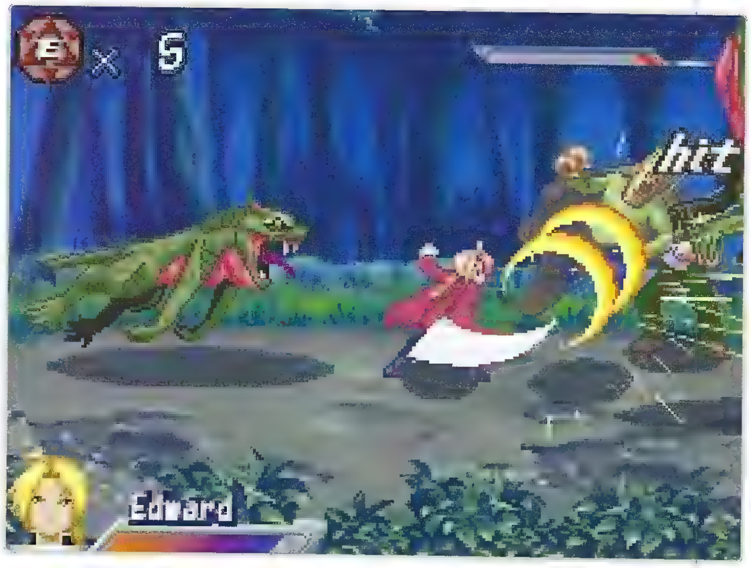












Fullmetal Alchemist/Dual Sympathy

score 7.0

System	Nintendo DS	**Online/Multi**	1
Developer	Budcat Creations	**Available**	October
Publisher	Majesco	**ESRB Rating**	E 10+

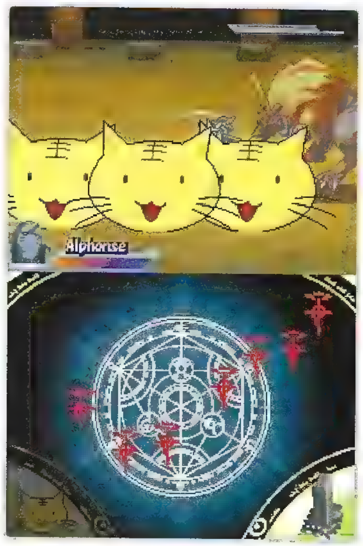
There have been a lot of Fullmetal Alchemist video games. As a fan of the show, it was more than frustrating that so many of them were lackluster. In the years since the series debuted, I've wanted one thing: An awesome Fullmetal game.

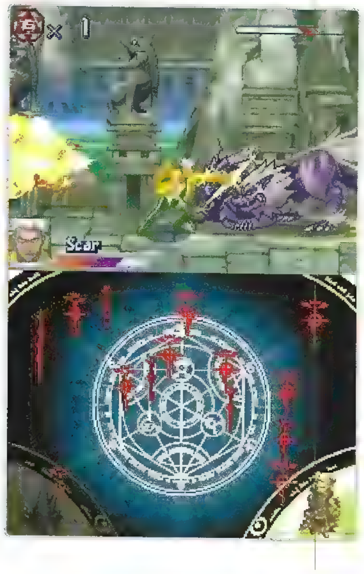
Dual Sympathy comes close. Real close.

A side-scrolling action title, FMA: DS has the polish of an exceptional game, but never does it transcend the action genre. The DS cart follows the plot of the original anime without wavering, as if stuck to the tracks, unable to divert. In fact, players unfamiliar with the Fullmetal series may have difficulty following the story of the DS game, as much of the narrative is implied rather than conveyed.

That being said, fans won't be disappointed. FMA: DS is crammed full of features, including voice acting from the English dub cast, touch-screen alchemy, mini games and sweet, sweet graphics. Cut scenes are stills from the anime itself, and the familiar melodies of the show squeak out of the DS nostalgically.

Playing the game is satisfying, but never stunning. Unlike the anime from which is draws inspiration, it gets a little repetitive. Pressing "A" can almost get you through the whole piece. Still, if you like Fullmetal, this is the one portable game you can't go without. **Heather Campbell**





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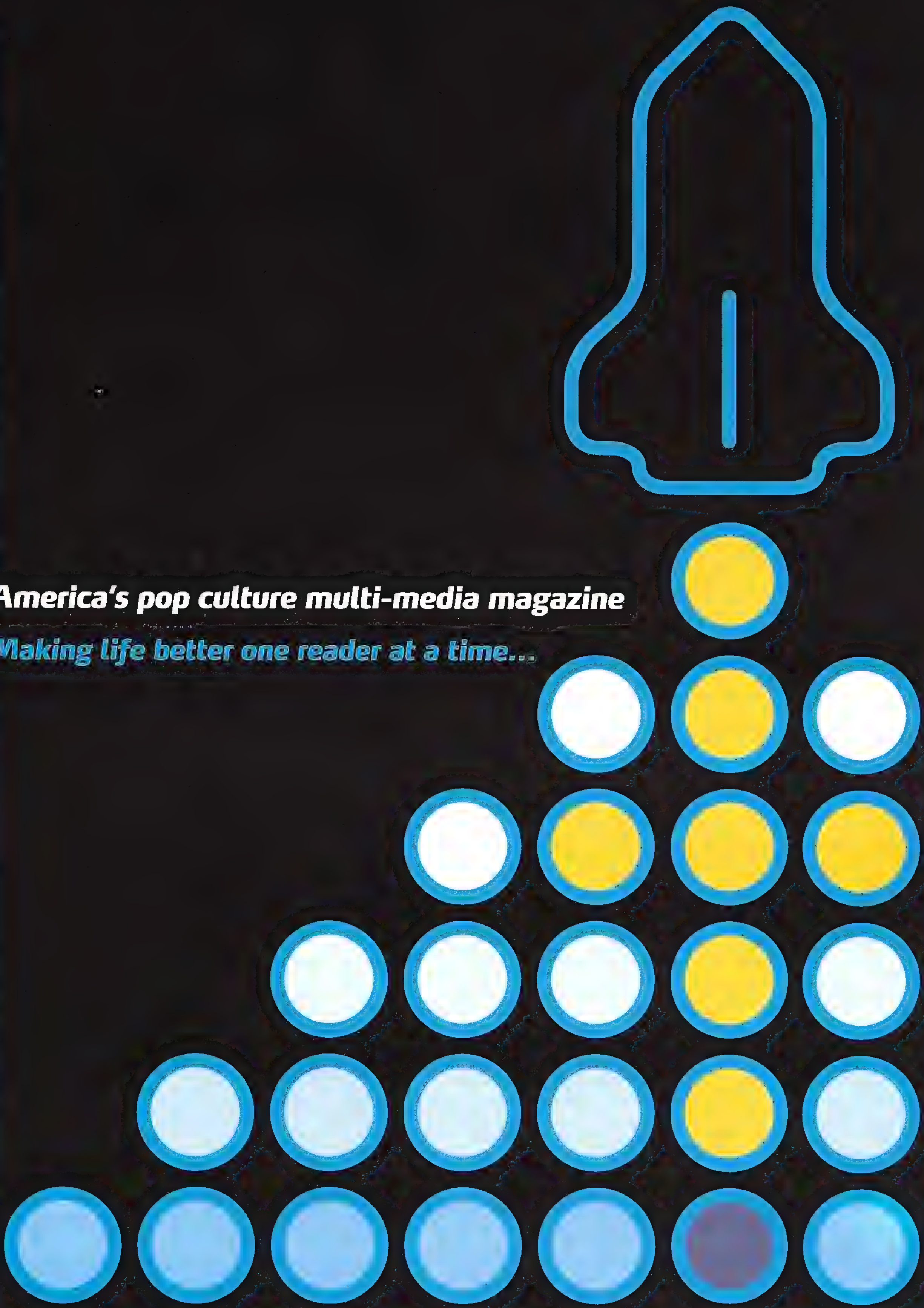

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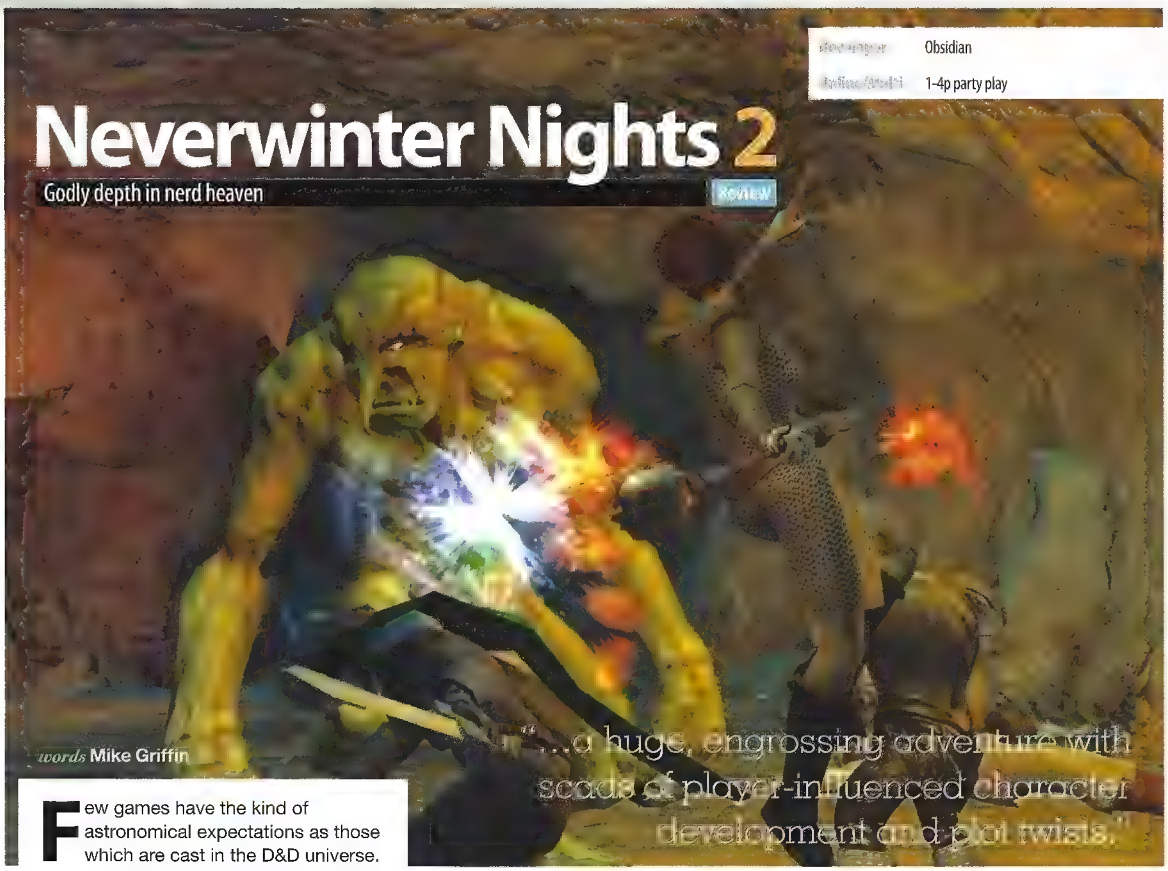

Neverwinter Nights 2

Godly depth in nerd heaven

Review

Developer	Obsidian	Publisher	Atari
Online/Multi	1-4p party play	Available	November

words **Mike Griffin**

"...a huge, engrossing adventure with scads of player-influenced character development and plot twists."

Few games have the kind of astronomical expectations as those which are cast in the D&D universe. We witnessed the phenomenon front and center earlier this year in D&D Online, where an extremely vocal core of the community insisted upon features that held strict to the D&D tenets. We spoke to Obsidian's executive producer just before Neverwinter Nights 2 shipped out, and he reported a similar situation in the NWN 2 forums: near-obsessive analysis and puritanical expectation. Obsidian has an easy answer for the RPG heads: if we didn't put it in, you can. NWN 2 is a huge D&D adventure, rulebook and campaign-maker in one box, so deep and customizable it will exhaust—and delight—the most fanatical of RPG players.

Neverwinter Nights 2 ships with an extensive main campaign starring you, the young protagonist from a tiny swampland village. The world is Faerun and this particular universe is Forgotten Realms, the most popular medieval fantasy slice of the D&D franchise. Drawing from their experience on KOTOR 2, Obsidian has provided rather spectacular depth here in terms of character development. If you're looking to pick-up NWN 2 strictly for the story and branching paths, you will not be disappointed. Tons of metrics keep track of every dialogue decision you make, shaping the behavior of both the plot and your band of NPC companions. Your character can follow dramatically different moral paths and there's a staggering amount of contingency dialogue, voice-over and cinematics at every step. Characters have rich history and defined personalities that must be considered during decision-making. Most are gifted with fine VO and humor abounds; many a codpiece joke to be had. Now, if only the execution was up to task.

The game feels pretty clunky. The entire campaign was developed using the same toolset that players have access to and it carries some unwanted, unwieldy baggage. Loading, for example, is way too frequent and the game's system of modular areas makes for lengthy loading periods. Plenty of side quests, to use MMO vernacular, are of the 'FedEx' variety: quick go-fetch or assassination missions. The excessive loading makes such simple tasks needlessly tedious. World collision isn't so hot and characters can get stuck on objects or pathfind in oddball ways. Some of the more essential commands, such as telling your NPC party to stay put, are given inadequate visibility in the game's interface. Graphical rough edges like floating trees and rocks can be found, and the engine needs too much power at high end settings. NWN 2 looks nice with full shadows and normal mapping, but not *so* nice that it should coast around 20 to 30 fps on a modern gaming rig.

Despite the rough edges, there's nothing game-breaking, so it's fairly easy to let it slide. NNights 2 is a huge, engrossing adventure with scads of player-influenced character development and plot twists. The toolset is the most detailed of its kind, a guaranteed obsession for D&D module makers who want to sculpt adventures to their standards and a great source of extended play—online too, with up to 3 friends—for your transferable campaign characters.

Neverwinter Nights 2

score 7.5

+ Main campaign is huge and has dozens of satisfying twists and turns, alternate outcomes. Lovely soundtrack. All-powerful toolset.

– Excessive loading diminishes gameplay flow. Collision either too floaty or too rigid; leads to some pathing AI hiccups. Engine is a hungry, hungry hippo.

Tomb of the Betrayers

The Countdown has begun...

Rocket is ready to Launch!

LOOK!
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SAMPLE COVER

CROSSOVER: ANIME
DVD, TV, MOVIES
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Coming January 2007

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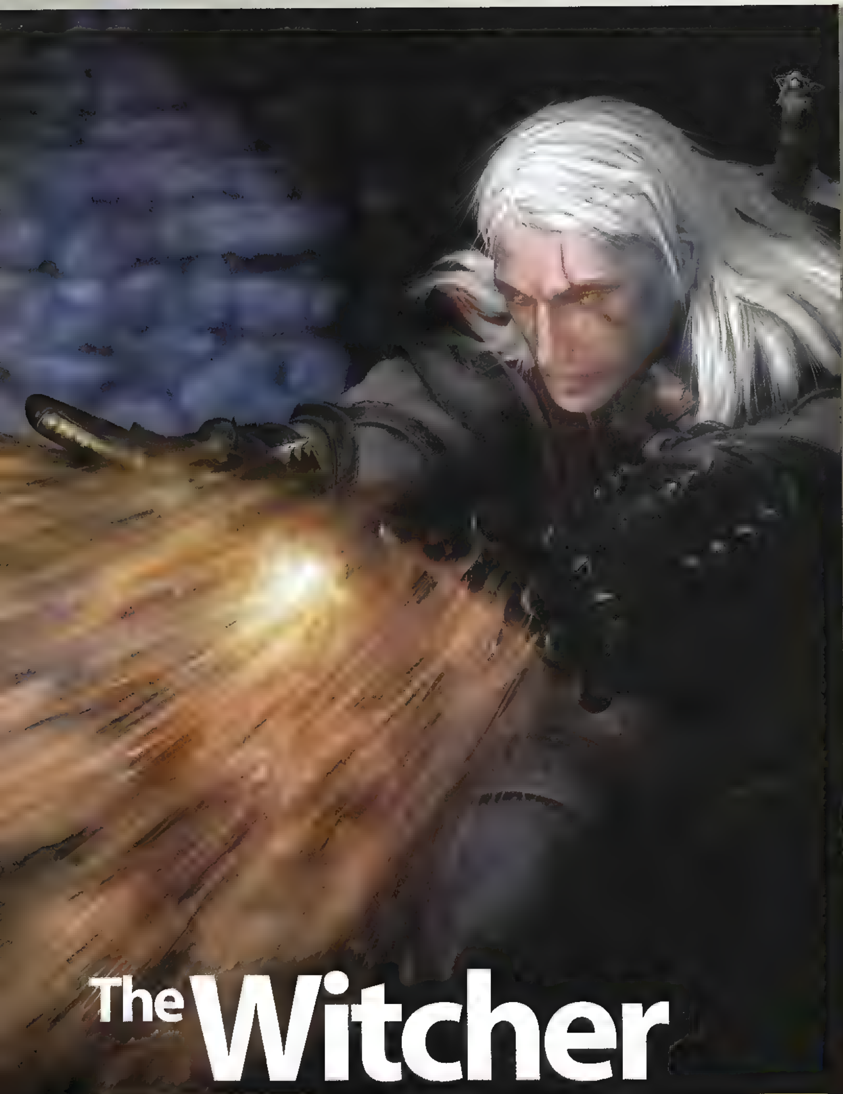


The Witcher

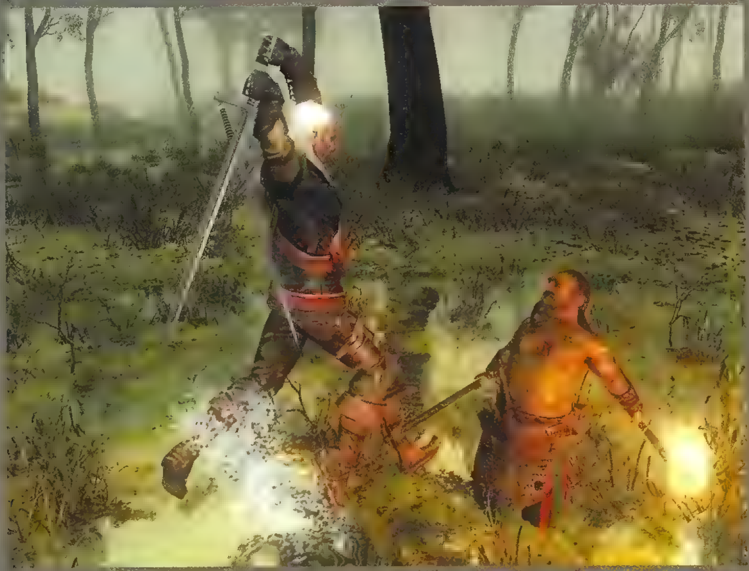
Cleaving through the shadows

words **Mike Griffin**

With games like Elveon, S.T.A.L.K.E.R. and Infernal on the way, a new generation of well-funded Eastern European developers have staked their claim in next-gen gaming. Joining the shortlist of high-potential titles is The Witcher, a violent action RPG set in novelist Andrzej Sapkowski's dark medieval fantasy world. CD Projekt snagged BioWare's Aurora engine to provide the game with a strong, branching-path RPG core, then they went to town on the combat system and graphical enhancements. Geralt, our resident Witcher, is part of a secret warrior brotherhood, trained, tortured and genetically mutated to hunt and kill evil in all its incarnations. And evil is rising.

We caught up with Maciek Szczesnik, senior gameplay designer at CD Projekt's Red team. Nowadays Maciek spends most of his time leading the combat and game mechanics division of The Witcher team, ordering up super-sized mo-cap combos and ensuring Geralt kicks ass like no other.

Developer	CD Projekt Red	Publisher	CD Projekt
Online/Multi	None	Available	Q1 '07



"…a secret warrior brotherhood, trained, tortured and genetically mutated to hunt and kill evil…"

Interview

Maciek Szczesnik_Senior Gameplay Designer_CD Projekt Red

play: Since you're neck-deep in combat right now, let's start there. We've seen the motion-capture session videos. The combos and finishers look awesome…
Maciek: So as you already know, combat in The Witcher features an innovative combat-sequence concept. We've put a lot of effort into perfecting this feature. One of the latest improvements is the addition of extra skills that increase performance within the combo; for example, the ability to get closer to the enemy without breaking a combination. We're constantly working on the general combat ergonomics. Right now we are developing the special abilities of monsters, their combat styles, strategies, and the usage of Witcher spells—or "signs" as we call them. Resourceful players will discover great new tactics by combining signs with steel or silver weapons.

You've given the game a serious RPG core with stats and skills. Is it difficult to mix with all this action?
First of all, because of the unique concept of Witchers as a brotherhood, we had to design different types of combat in the game for use against humans or monsters. There is a steel and silver sword skill-advancing system, also used for Witcher spells. During the game you're able to configure those skills to best fit your favorite strategy and tactics, so you'll learn how to balance magic and sword fighting to optimize the effect. Each attack has several traits like modifiers, critical effects and elemental resistances. There is also a precise accuracy test for parrying, dodging and hitting. Effectiveness depends on the level of character development. There will be more than 250 skills to acquire, which are grouped in a big tree-like system. Some concentrate on magic, others on combat.

It's a long game, at 40 or so hours. That's a lot of time spent with the main character. How customizable is Geralt?
Since the choice of the main character is forced by the game, we focused on offering great flexibility in character development and individuality. We have optimized the game so it only allows players to acquire about 60% of all

> "...we leave the moral aspect to the player. When you are responsible for the effect, it increases the importance of making a choice. Hence, every dialogue decision is subjective..."
>
> **Maciek Szczesnik, Senior Gameplay Designer, CD Projekt Red**

available skills in a given run. So there's a completely new development path worth replaying. Players will create their own individual Witchers, specializing in different aspects of their craft.

Aurora is a great RPG engine, but it's getting a little long in the tooth. The Witcher looks like it's added a lot of extra goodies to the code...

Yeah, we have heavily modified the BioWare Aurora engine. In fact, we have re-written its primary elements from scratch, such as the rendering engine, RPG system and also the plot system that allows us to create and implement quests. We implemented the latest vertex and pixel shaders so now every element of the game has a unique appearance and we also have numerous full-screen effects. The enhanced engine allowed us to increase the level of detail. This environment is realistic; there is a 24-hour cycle as the sun moves across the sky, we've implemented outstanding weather effects, lapping water with dynamically changing transparency levels and reflections, dynamic soft shadows. Another big upgrade is the addition of a realistic physics engine. So any pushed object will roll across the ground and enemies will fall in a large variety of ways.

The skills, signs and other RPG effects need interface elements, so how did you balance the control system between UI and action combat?

The game's control system is complex but completely intuitive. That was the main goal concerning the UI, and we reached it. Combat scenes are really attractive visually, because of more than two-hundred different animations we gathered during motion-capture. We hired professional stuntmen and swordsmen for that to ensure the realism of medieval fights and to enhance them with a violent, cinematic flair. That's what people expect from fantasy games anyway [laughs]. The physics engine lets us have some nice interaction with the environment. There is also one of the Witcher's signs named Aard...it's a strong telekinetic spell that pushes enemies away and has great influence on the surroundings.

What kind of music and sound mixing did you use on The Witcher?

There are two in-house musicians working on sounds for The Witcher and they have created about 90 minutes of music so far. They made a major effort to compose a unique score that fit the canon for fantasy games. Music is, of course, dynamically adjusted to the scenery and the atmosphere, or the situation. It seriously increases the atmosphere. There is a large variety of compositions, so you can expect some dynamic tribal rhythms, epic choirs and soft ambient sounds.

So you re-wrote the quest system, but we see you're still using Neverwinter Nights-style dialogue choices. How much influence will the player have over the story?

Almost every quest in the game can be completed in a number of ways. That's why we decided not to divide players' choices between good and evil; we leave the moral aspect to the player. When you are responsible for the effect, it increases the importance of making a choice. Hence, every dialogue decision is subjective and brings a different solution with appropriate consequences. And if you're the save/load seeker of the most profitable option, forget it! The effect of many important early choices won't appear until much later in the game.

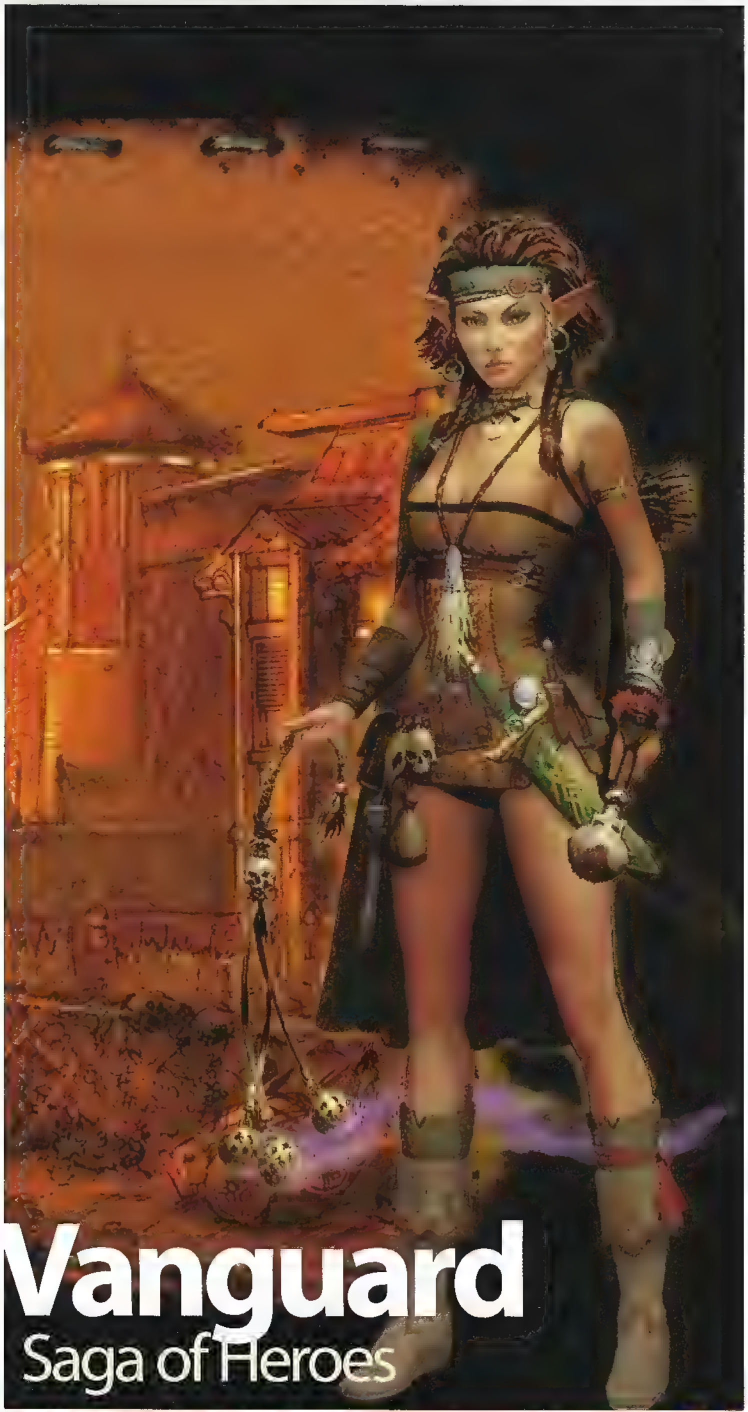
What kind of story devices do you use to catch the player off-guard?

We added a butterfly effect to many events...so don't be surprised if an apparently banal situation will completely change later gameplay situations. Everything counts. We're of the opinion that this will give players a perfect illusion of actually being a part of the game world; the feeling that their choices really matter.

You have to tie it up somewhere though. How much of an effect do player choices have on the way the story ends for Geralt?

The player's choice is very important. In the main plot, it is possible to complete the game in three different ways. Differences between alternative endings are huge and concern many aspects of the world, like the geopolitical situation. All events that lead to a final ending require a different role of the player through unique objectives. It also depends on players' choices regarding which factions he will support in the game. What is similar is that Geralt always stays a lone wolf...influential, powerful, but never being a real part of any faction.

The Witcher's blend of branching RPG gameplay and vicious combat will start taking names and crushing skulls in early 2007. **play**



Vanguard
Saga of Heroes

The old ranger returns to make things right

Developer	Sigil Games Online	Publisher	Sony Online Entertainment
Online/Multi	Persistent online	Available	February '07

words **Mike Griffin**

The game we should be crediting for this modern massively multiplayer explosion in probably Ultima Online, but if you consider the pace of PC gaming's evolution, namely the 2D to 3D transition of the late 90s, much of the inspiration for today's MMO template comes from EverQuest. Before WoW and all its peers had ever touched a concept board, EverQuest was considered by many to be a revolutionary game. It was among the first PC titles that *required* a 3D card to play, and back in 1998 those dreadfully low-polygon environments were pretty spectacular. The game also helped define a palette of design mandates—from character development to virtual economies—that influenced virtually every major MMO to follow. And eight years later, it all comes back to Brad McQuaid, co-creator of EQ and the driving force behind Sigil Games' Vanguard, a next-gen online RPG set for release in early '07.

Vanguard is an ambitious and enigmatic online RPG. This brand of full-featured MMO requires vast reserves of manpower to generate such a huge persistent state online world, and to handle the magnitude of substance needed to occupy thousands of coexisting players. When developers in other genres are filling up ten hours worth of content, a large MMO team is creating enough content for *ten months* of progressive gameplay. Sigil's first publishing partner was Microsoft, and then MS handed off to SOE, so resources have not been a problem for the 100+ person team. This doesn't mean Sigil is making it easy on itself. Brad's controversial design directive defies the current status quo: as modern era MMO titles like WoW flourish using

> "Sigil's first publishing partner was Microsoft, and then MS handed off to SOE, so resources have not been a problem..."

Vanguard's world design is epic in scope

private instanced dungeons, Brad said, "There won't be instancing in Vanguard." The entire world of Telon would be seamless shared space. While other MMO games bombard players with impassable geography, Brad declared: "If it can be seen, it can be explored" and this open-minded mantra became law in Vanguard's sprawling assembly.

Under the guidance of detailed world concepts by beloved fantasy artist Keith Parkinson (may he rest in peace), Vanguard's land of Telon would take shape. Three enormous continents rose from the sea: northern Thestra, the verdant elf homeland plagued by undead; Qalia, arid sub-tropical wastes under siege by ancient elementals; and Kojan, a sweltering jungle archipelago beset by extra-planar demons. The original rendering technology, lost chromosomes in a pool of seamless code mutation, is the Unreal 2.5 engine. Whatever's left of it, this is by far the most impressive exploitation of the engine we've seen. Telon stretches out in all directions, with kilometers of landscape in view. The world expands vertically in much the same way, and we've already witnessed opulent floating cities. McQuaid dropped hints of vast Atlantian-like underwater regions. The overall aesthetic is decidedly western fantasy, and the game juggles loads of candy; bump-mapped terrain, HDR, Oblivion-like density in forests (thank you, SpeedTree), and very appealing day/night lighting cycles. A beta player once broadcasted in-game: "Make some progress, move away from your starting area, and just explore. It's an amazing world." Sage advice...

"...bump-mapped terrain, HDR, Oblivion-like density in forests, and very appealing day/night lighting cycles."

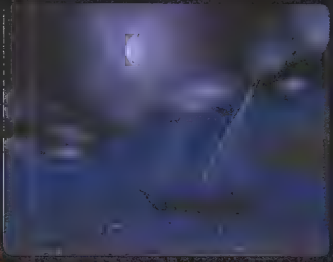
Before going anywhere in this world, you'll need a role. In case you haven't been getting a sense of Vanguard's uncompromising design, check out these numbers: 19 different playable races and 15 professions to choose from. At one's disposal, everything from dwarves and goblins to catmen and lesser giants, and all manner of offensive and defensive fighter, rogue, ranger, healer, nuker and hybrid. Combat with every class is a refreshing mix of ability combos that build up energy (or inner focus in the monk's case) for devastating attacks. We took to raising an elven druid, as the natural habitat in Thestra was rather beguiling. The character creation process is easily one of the most detailed in the genre, especially for physical and facial design. You can cycle through style, color and proportions for body, hair, brow, eyes, cheeks, nose and chin with multiple sliders and real-time morphing. Ultimately, it will be conduct and fashion that really separates one player from the rest.

In Vanguard, you can actually level up as a diplomat or artisan. Diplomacy is a fascinating little mini game, played out versus an NPC in "Parley." The diplomacy board is loaded with expressions, statements and assertions, and these can be further honed by evaluations, repeals and rebuttals. You're not very adept as a beginner diplomat, but you'll expand your negotiatory repertoire by engaging in diplomacy with more NPCs, basically snagging their best lines for future use. Crafting junkies will find major quest and progression paths for blacksmithing, becoming a clothing merchant, creating food, jewelry, bows, furniture or even boats. There is thoughtful social encouragement built into these trade skills too; when harvesting wild materials in a party, for example, yields will immediately increase. Artisans can also spin suave threads that grant diplomacy bonuses. It may be prudent to befriend an expert crafter if you're the kind of adventurer that prefers to smash heads together, instead of toiling over hammer and anvil.

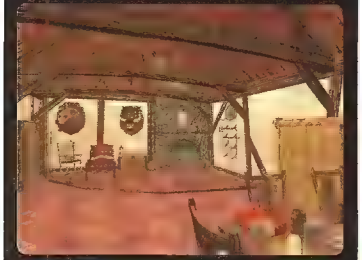
in closing

It's difficult to say what kind of player Vanguard will magnetize. The seamless non-instanced world is so open-ended it could be daunting. And while catacombs employ interesting scripts to manage events and special enemies, there's still the risk of spawn camping. This is one of the main reasons instancing came about in the first place. On the other hand, there's plenty of room in Vanguard's gargantuan world and with so many ways to advance as an adventurer, artisan or diplomat, players will be hard pressed to fixate on any single task, in any part of this meticulously conceived landscape, for very long. McQuaid's instincts may prove to be self-fulfilling in practice. **play**

It's a life at sea for me
Players can purchase or build their own aquatic vessels and take to the high seas. Special ocean corridors will link the continents to miles of seamless, fully-modeled offshore marine exploration. Feel free to take out rod and reel, but be careful what you disturb in the murky blue or you could be swimming with the fishes.



Our house, in the middle of the street
Most modern MMO titles offer some form of player housing, but it's usually totally detached from the rest of the game world. That doesn't work in Vanguard. A person's newly built residence is visible (and can be visited, with permission) in the midst of the same seamless space as fellow players. Inside, owners can pick up, pin up and re-arrange all interior décor. A seemingly mundane no-stat item you find on a quest might become a fine table centerpiece.



Clear skies and a tail wind
On land, you'll ride beasts like horses, camels and wolves, and players can acquire such mounts early on. After you've seen many more winters, you'll earn access to smooth, controllable aerial travel aboard flying mounts like pegasi and drakes. Happily, Vanguard has some of most attractive sky visuals in recent memory.

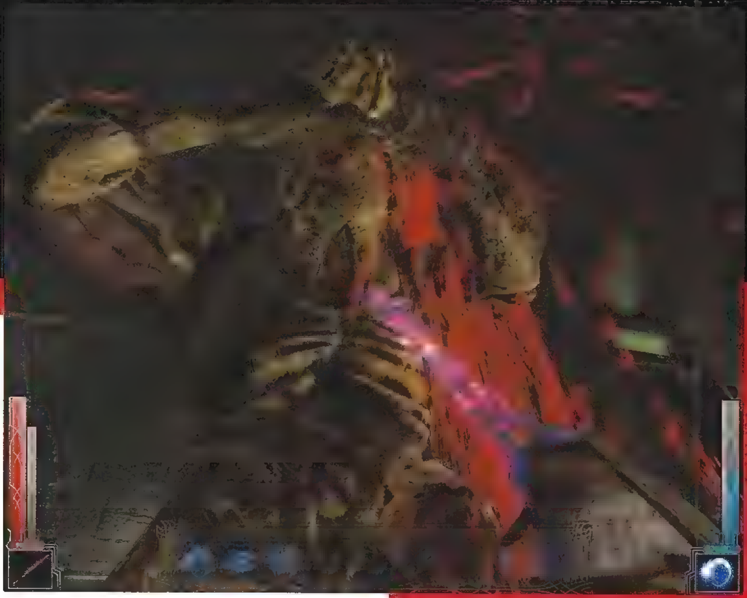
Dark Messiah of Might and Magic

A clinic of first person fantasy action

Review

words Mike Griffin

Developer	Arkane (MP by Kuju)	Publisher	Ubisoft
Online/Multi	32p team	Available	October



If you haven't played Dark Messiah of Might and Magic yet, doing so is recommended. You'll be in good form now too, as early compatibility issues have been patched-up. We were fortunate enough to have a test machine that was exceedingly compatible with Dark Messiah from the get-go, providing flawless observation of young Sareth's journey through one of the year's best first person action games.

Dark Messiah is Arkane's best effort to date. They've made splendid use of the Source engine, really showcasing the improved lighting and HDR to great effect. Dungeon environments are gorgeous and the creature texturing is among the finest the engine has known. Beyond the shiny layers, Arkane has harnessed the engine's finesse for storytelling. Characters and animations somehow feel more organic in Source, drawing forth the player's empathy, fear and wrath. Main characters enjoy great voice-over, while minor characters like town guards have awkward and amusing ambiguous accents; an unintended homage to Kevin Costner's Robin Hood. All told, Dark Messiah's high fantasy world is clad in compelling and stylish presentation.

Arkane is a skilled designer inside this perspective. Players can carve out—through class trees—a thief, spell caster or balls-out melee thug and each slice of gameplay manages to feel immersive and complete. Levels are designed to support all three forms of first person engagement: graceful, shadow embracing, backstabbing stealth, long range magical crowd-control, and in-your-face, boot to the head, combo heavy sword clashes. If you normally experience motion sickness in FPS games, Dark Messiah may have you blowing chunks. The action and movement are fierce, with chillingly animated creatures that side-step, deek and parry. Each level is ripe for exploration as well, with hidden nooks to locate. The rope arrow bow will definitely come in handy.

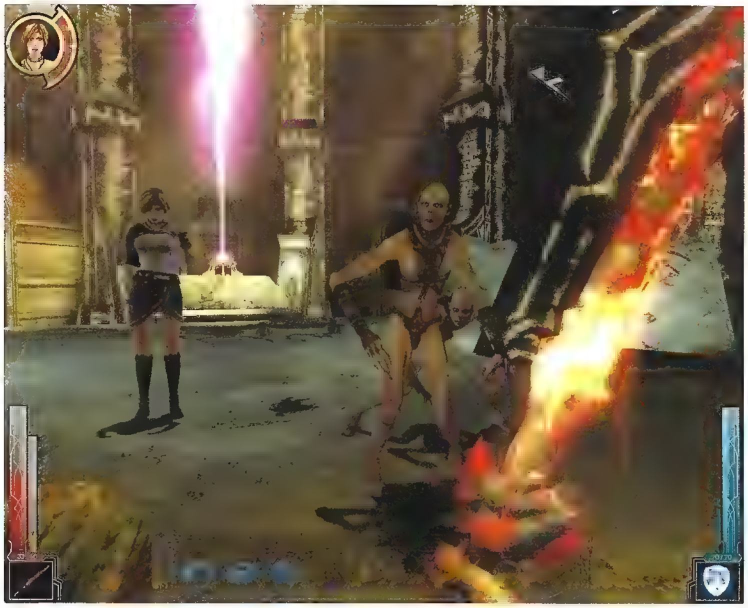
Dark Messiah's story development is a little frail, but it compensates via critical decisions and alternate endings. And while the game fundamentally plays more like a first person shooter than action RPG, the skill system is an enjoyable pursuit and there are clever situations involving alignment choices that are worth savoring. When you've had your fill of DMoMM's campaign, Ubisoft has included a multiplayer component with manic Undead vs. Human team play. While a bit unbalanced in its current incarnation, the MP Crusade mode is a nice bonus that should improve over time.

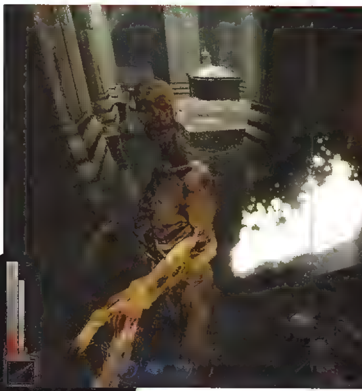
> "The action and movement are fierce, with chillingly animated creatures that side-step, deek and parry."

Dark Messiah of Might and Magic

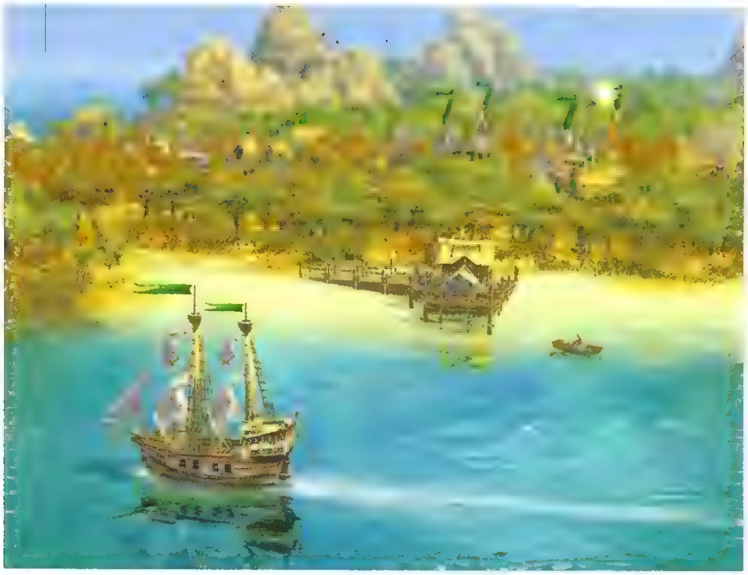
score 8.5

+	If you can run HL2 Ep.1, you're all set. Great first person rendering in combat and exploration. Action has depth. Excellent weapon sounds. Multiplayer mode = bonus.
–	Long level loading. Ropes bleed through walls (bad when you're climbing one). The campaign's combat is so good, you'll want more of it and less exploring.





Shambling abominations begging for decapitation.



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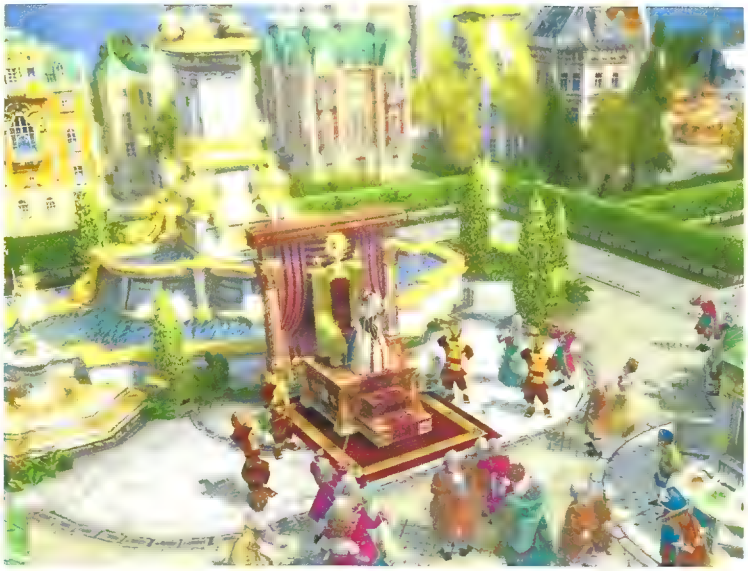


1701 A.D.

On her majesty's colonial service

words **Mike Griffin**

Signing 1701 A.D. for North American release was a smart move on Aspyr's part. It's a pleasant surprise. Gifted with outstanding production values (thanks to a $10 million Euro budget) and great atmosphere, 1701 A.D. combines bits of Sims, Civ, Age of Empires and Black & White into an enchanting formula of new world colonization across the seven seas.

Top-notch presentation will draw you into 1701 A.D. right away. The fully-orchestrated symphonic/acoustic score is superb, with strong, high-spirited themes that enhance the feel of the world. It's one of few PC game soundtracks scored and mixed entirely in 5.1 surround, including sound effects and ambience, and the results are impressive. It's also a delightful game to soak-in with the eyes. Exaggerated angles and striking colors compliment charming animations and subtle post-processing. Zooming 1701's camera all the way out showcases map edges (fog of war, if you will) stylized to look like old sailors' ocean maps. It's one fine touch among many.

This is too succinct a review to explore 1701 A.D.'s excellent world-building depth, but rest assured, it will keep you busy. Inhabitants need food, shelter, schooling, faith, booze and community. Resource gathering is effortless, freeing-up more time for pioneer progression. Great new artwork and incidental animation accompanies the evolution of a city settlement. Fishermen cast out nets, marching bands play, and ambient creatures will stay close to their homes, like the lazy felines of aristocrats that wander through wealthy districts. Various factions, such as the Aztecs, Iroquais and Indians, will offer to trade unique commodities, furs and talismans. 1701 has natural and mystical elements too, like earthquakes, volcanoes, or a locust plague reprisal should you attack the Indians without warrant. Each faction has a named leader you can confer with for various reasons. For example, you might ingratiate yourself with the pirate leader Ramirez simply to discover the location of his secret island hideout, and then navigate a warship over to his cove and slay the sea dog. Every move you make is designed to earn the queen's approval and thus generate more exploration funds.

Though colonization is the goal, 1701 has a side mission system too. The Free Trader, for example, is a middleman for oceanic mischief. He offers missions called Assignments where you can hunt down pirate ships, salvage famous shipwrecks, rescue castaways and escort merchants. Meanwhile, you can set-up automated trade routes between your coastal warehouses and business partners on other islands—be they AI or human (four-player LAN and internet play is supported). The game's interface, for the most part, is very intuitive, and intelligent visual cues help to monitor population status, missions and diplomacy.

1701 A.D. is Aspyr's most polished US release thus far. It's pretty much guaranteed entertainment for ardent city-builders and strategy aficionados. Serious depth, a lush soundtrack and pretty visuals conspire to create a fine new addition to the genre.

> "…set-up automated trade routes between your coastal warehouses and business partners on other islands."

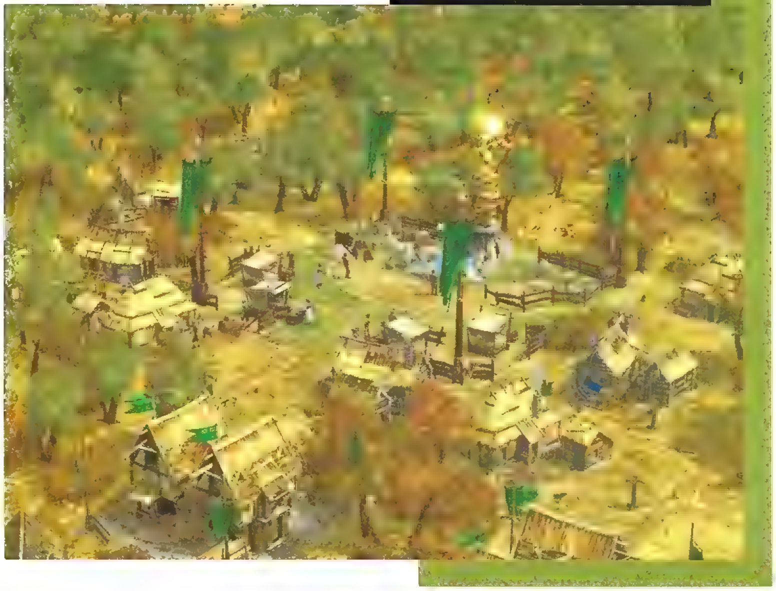
1701 A.D.

score 8.0

+ [illegible]

– [illegible]

From grubby pioneer town to bustling new world metropolis



Wizet

Persistent online

NX Games

Now

MapleStory

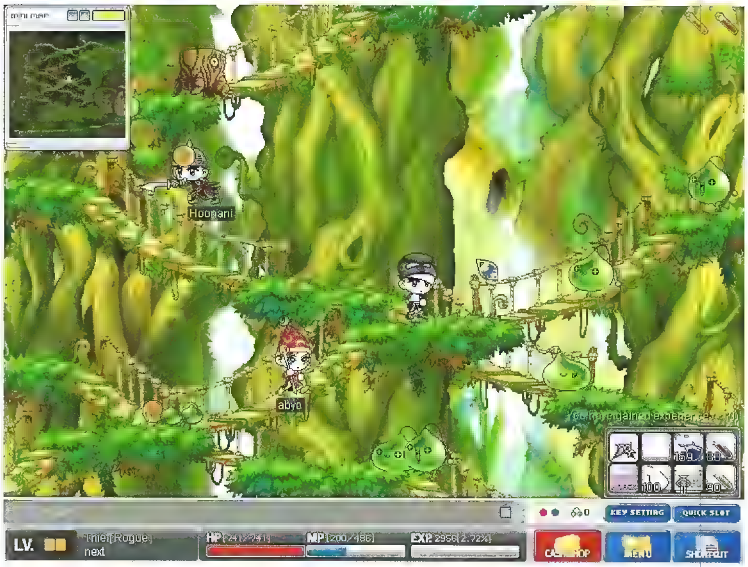
Massively transmogrified

Mike Griffin

Amazingly, only one developer-publisher duo has attempted to merge an online RPG blueprint with a 2D side-scrolling perspective, and the combination has become a rousing success. The game is MapleStory, and it's now being offered to North American players by Wizet and NX Games. Officially listed in these parts as MapleStory Global, NX Games has localized the client and incorporated all significant content upgrades. So, how rich can a persistent state 2D side-scrolling world be, especially when it's free? One might be surprised…

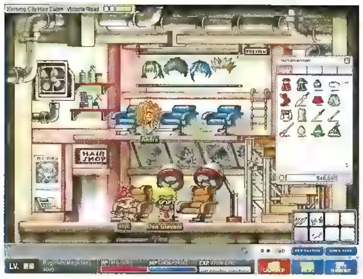
MapleStory adheres to the core features that players expect and enjoy in an online RPG: multiple job paths for your character, quests to complete, critters to kill in the field, equipment to collect, and thousands of players to meet from around the world. When you're through with MapleStory's beginner phase and move into your first job advancement as warrior, mage, bowman or thief, the game really opens up. Spend time solo training in the 2D fields whacking oddball monsters, or party with up to five players. Everyone in the group gets a 10% experience bonus, so it's worth finding some good hunting partners. Certain boss monsters like Zakum can only be met while assaulting his realm in a party. The action and movement feels like a traditional 2D platformer, with the addition of familiar RPG hotkeys to trigger job skills that you've developed. Between the side-scrolling perspective and easily-mastered controls, MapleStory injects a classic console-like instant gratification into its surprisingly layered online RPG formula.

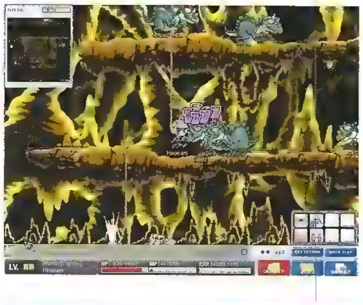
MapleStory's super-deformed avatar sprites can be heavily customized and it's a quality that really brings the game's community together. The MS forums regularly feature "Rate my appearance!" posts, as players showcase their avatar's latest fashions. Wizet has created hundreds of unique and bizarre items and apparel, and some of the best stuff is only available in the game's Cash Shop, a virtual item gallery that can be credited using a few bucks from your Pay Pal account. This currency can also be earned by performing well at special in-game events. In addition to the Cash Shop's large and frequently eccentric spectrum of clothing, hair and eye styles for one's 2D avatar, you can also stock up on stuff like teleport stones, potions, double XP scrolls and popular pets. The pets can be dressed, fed different foods and leveled-up through victory in battle, just like their masters. Naturally, plenty of random loot will pop out of slain monsters and players can trade and sell items to each other.



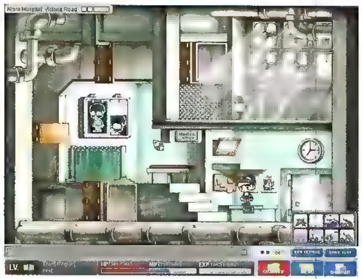
MapleStory's aesthetic is a big departure from the typical modern MMO title and there's a goodly chunk of avatar development and customization to compliment its colorful 2D sprites and backgrounds. The game's twitch controls and fast 2D gameplay (i.e., "Jump Quests" that rely entirely on precision platforming) are refreshing. MS is absolutely free to download and play online, and just about any PC will run the game. Obviously it lacks the sophistication, storyline depth and leveling variety of premium MMO games, yet MapleStory offers plenty of evening entertainment…and you can't beat the price.

"So, how rich can a persistent state 2D side-scrolling world be, especially when it's free? One might be surprised…





Not your typical PC experience…



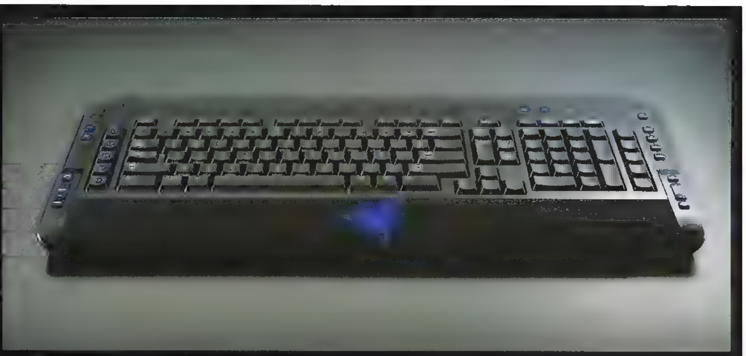
Postscript

Razor expands gaming peripheral range

Most gamers only know Razer for their high-end gaming mouse products, but that's about to change. With the release of their new keyboard, sound card and 5.1 headphone gaming peripherals, Razer wants a piece of the pie that Logitech, Creative Labs and others have been controlling for years. Like their mice, these Razer products are clearly designed for gamers.

Razor Tarantula

The Razer Tarantula is a fully programmable keyboard built for expandability. The device's on board memory allows you to store five unique profiles right to the keyboard, while the software allows an unprecedented 100 profiles to be created and saved. In line with Logitech's G-15 keyboard, the Tarantula also has ten macro keys that can be assigned complex recorded button sequences. Additionally, you can remove individual keys and move them around for ease of use or color coding. The Tarantula includes handy ports too: two USBs, a headphone input, microphone input and a docking mechanism for iPods or Razer's webcam, the BattleEye. Cost: $89.99.



Razor Barracuda HP-1 Gaming Headphones

We've yet to meet a pair a 5.1 headphones that can claim to be the ideal gaming, music and movie solution, but Razer's Barracuda HP-1 comes close. Designed to be paired with the AC-1 sound card (but not necessary), the HP-1 headphones have integrated eight different sound drivers—six for mids and highs, two for subwoofer—to offer real 5.1 support. The HP-1 will actually plug into the side, rear, sub and center jacks on your sound card, so it's not faking it. The 'phones also include a detachable mic and a volume control box with dials for each channel. The positional quality of 5.1 audio via the HP-1 is really effective, whether connected via the AC-1 card or through generic on-board audio, but the sound itself required a fair bit of EQ tweaking to achieve satisfactory levels. Weak bass and a tinny center channel characterize this headphone's lesser capabilities. If you already have a pair of high-end headphones and you're happy with the sound quality, the HP-1 price tag and its gaming-centric use (much better cans in the $100+ range for music) may prove off-putting. Cost: $129.99.

World Of Warcraft	Vivendi Universal
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War Dark Crusade Expansion Pack	THQ
The Sims 2 Glamour Life Stuff Expansion Pack	Electronic Arts
Company Of Heroes	THQ
The Sims 2	Electronic Arts
Desperate Housewives	Buena Vista Games
Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	LucasArts
Reel Deal Slots Mystic Forest	Phantom EFX
MS Age Of Empires III	Microsoft
Quake 4	Activision

Guild Wars Nightfall Winterfest 2006 Tournament

With the arrival of Guild Wars Nightfall, the highly regarded free-to-play MMO's latest campaign in, ArenaNet has also launched the Winterfest 2006 ladder season. Top guilds that think they have the gumption to face the world will need to submit a tournament roster of ten players to ArenaNet before December 13th, 2006. The top 32 rated guilds (based on guild PvP play through November and December) will face-off in the season-ending, five-round tournament. Even if you're not into the slice of Guild Wars that involves competitive PvP gameplay, the game's active tournament community and slick Observer mode make it easy to tune-in to a big live match-up.

Razor Barracuda AC-1 gaming audio card

The Audigy and X-Fi line have dominated high-end gaming audio for many years. Enter Razer with their Barracuda AC-1 sound card. Boasting a signal to noise ratio of 117 dB, the Barracuda specification is the highest among gaming cards. It includes a utility that allows tweakable "720-degree" positional audio. It's basically a clever processing/reverb effect that expands the stereo spectrum, designed to make it easier for players to triangulate their enemies' position by sound alone. The AC-1 demonstrated excellent range in most audio applications. The card's installation process is straightforward, and it features optical in and out jacks, in addition to an adapter for full multi-channel 1/8" inputs, such as those needed for a 5.1 system. Speaking of 5.1 surround systems, how about one that fits inside a pair of headphones… Cost: $179.99

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TGS 2006 SPECIAL part 2

Tokyo Game Show 06 Interview

Koji "IGA" Igarashi & Michiru Yamane

Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin

Play: First I'd like to ask, if you don't mind, why Portrait of Ruin isn't on the show floor? I was really looking forward to playing it.
IGA: Well...it's sort of...let's just say that was a decision that was out of my hands (laughs). But I have two copies right here! Want to give the cooperative play a try?

I have questions, of course (laughs). But sure!

(Play and IGA play the Boss Rush mode over Wi-Fi. Play chooses Charlotte; IGA Johnny, and both promptly get worked.)

IGA: That was fast (laughs). You can play this mode from the very beginning, but it's almost impossible to beat unless you go through the main game and collect equipment first. It's a lot of fun -- there are other Wi-Fi courses besides this one -- having one character heal the other, or protecting your partner as they're casting a magic spell. I hope this encourages friendship between the players (laughs).

It seems like a lot of fun...will this be local Wi-Fi only, or will there be net play?
IGA: The Boss Rush mode is playable online. We wanted to do more, but didn't really have enough time.

I see. I wasn't aware Miss Yamane would be here, but it's an honor to meet you...

IGA: She's a special guest (laughs)!

I'm a huge fan of your work. Let me begin with Miss Yamane, then. Your compositions are often dark and gothic in nature, even outside of Castlevania. Judging from the E3 sampler soundtrack, it seems that this game has a more upbeat sound.
Yamane: Yes, I wanted to try something new for this game. You could say it's got more of a pop sound.

(Yamane takes the game into a sound test [unconfirmed to be available in the final retail version] and begins playing a poppy, Egyptian-sounding track)

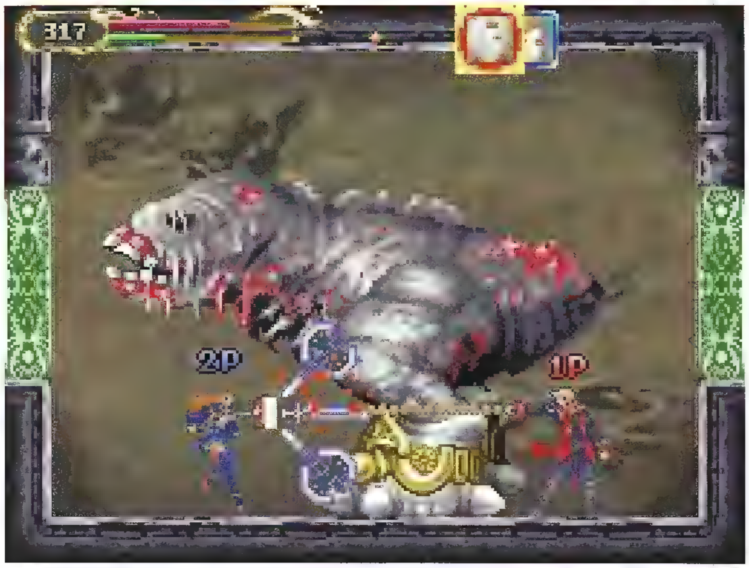
Yamane: This is probably my favorite track...

IGA: Wait, that's from one of the hidden stages. Don't play that (laughs)!

Hidden stages?
IGA: I didn't say anything (laughs).

Well, whatever it is we're looking forward to it (laughs). Miss Yamane, how is it working on chip music again, after so many years with redbook audio?
Yamane: It's not much different for me (laughs). I don't do the actual coding for the DS sound hardware. We have someone who's very proficient at it; I just compose the track and leave it to the experts to get it to sound right on the DS. But this time, especially, they've done an amazing job.

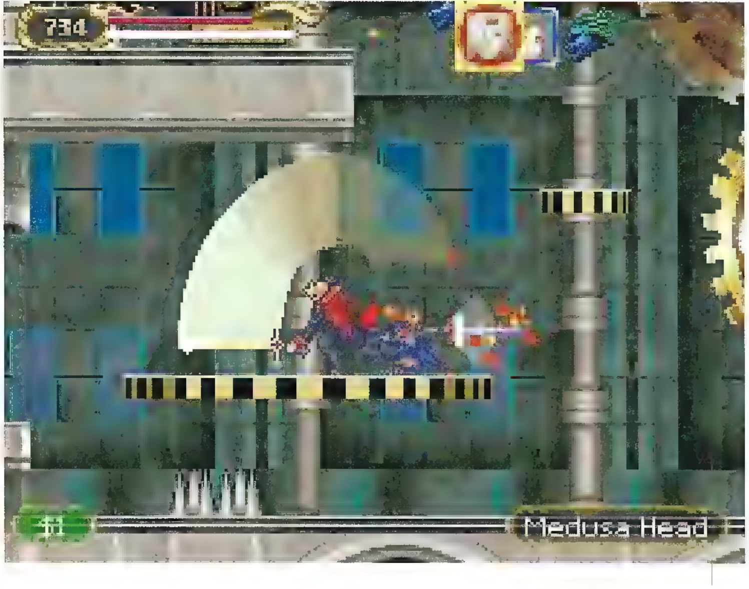
I've heard famous game composer Yuzo Koshiro is contributing music for this game. How did that come about?
IGA: I've known him for a while. I've been thinking about asking Yuzo to compose Castlevania music for some time, but the timing was never right. Since Curse of Darkness, Miss Yamane has told me, "I'm almost out of ideas!" (laughs). I thought bringing in Yuzo might be a good stimulus for Yamane, almost like a sort of competition. He's really a master at making weak sound hardware sound fantastic -- he comes from that chip music background. I'm really glad we were able to get him for this game.



Now I'd like to ask about the Wi-Fi features in this game. The previous two games in the series allowed you to trade Souls with friends, but it seems like there's a lot more going on in Portrait of Ruin.
IGA: There sure is. You can place up to eight items in your Wi-Fi shop to sell to other players. Maybe "selling" isn't exactly the right term. Your friends can buy the items from your shop, but you don't lose them.

The seller receives in-game money from this system?
IGA: Only half of the purchase price. But buying items from a human shop versus the NPC shop gives you a 20% discount -- things like Potions are really expensive

> "The Boss Rush mode is playable online. We wanted to do more, but didn't really have enough time."
>
> ~Koji "IGA" Igarashi



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in the game, so if you can you're going to want to buy them from other players. Also, there are a huge amount of items in this game, and it would be really difficult for you to get them all yourself, so buying rare items from other player's shops might be the only way to get them all.

Can you resell items you've bought from other players?
IGA: No, not unless you've obtained that item through the main game. In terms of the weapons you can sell, if you use them a lot in the main game, they become more powerful, and you can sell these upgraded weapons to other players. You could concentrate on one weapon, while your friend concentrates on another, and then swap them.

Would you say the buyer gets the better deal?
IGA: It's give-and-take. Buying items through other players' Wi-Fi stores accrues you points, and the more you have the more items you can sell in your own store.

Let's talk a little about the story. The enemy in this game, Brauner, is a vampire -- does he have any connection to Dracula?
IGA: I can't say too much, but Dracula's castle appeared during the first world war (Ed. Note -- in Castlevania: Bloodlines), and Brauner, although he became a vampire entirely through his own powers, was affected by this event.

This is a bit of a fannish question, but I'm curious as to how the Morris family acquired the Vampire Killer (Ed. Note -- the legendary whip of the Belmont family). We know the Belmonts had it as late as 1797, but by 1917 it's out of their hands...
IGA: That's a sharp question (laughs). I can't say too much, but at a certain point in time post-Richter, the Belmonts become unable to touch the Vampire Killer. It's passed on to the Morris family, who have Belmont blood but aren't, of course, true Belmonts. As a consequence they can't use the Vampire Killer as effectively as the true bloodline, as you'll see in this game.

So how did Julius Belmont get the Vampire Killer back some time prior to 1999?
IGA: I can't tell you that, either (laughs). Let's just say there's a reason why the Belmonts lost it, and a reason why they get it back in 1999 for the climactic final showdown (Ed. Note -- as yet, not a game). Please wait for future Castlevanias (laughs).

Speaking of future games, can we expect a new home console Castlevania any time soon?
IGA: We will definitely take the series into the next generation. How, exactly, I can't say yet. The marketplace is so strange right now -- you can say "the PS3's too expensive", or "the insides of the Wii are just a GameCube", or "the Xbox 360 isn't doing so well in Japan". We'll have to wait to see what happens in terms of sales before we make any decisions.

So the next Castlevania may be quite a ways off.
IGA: Well, we aren't going to end the series on DS with Portrait of Ruin. I think that would disappoint the fans -- we've got a fantastic engine running on the system and there are things you can only do with 2-D. I think we'll be working on DS for a while. Which isn't to say we won't be working on PSP as well...

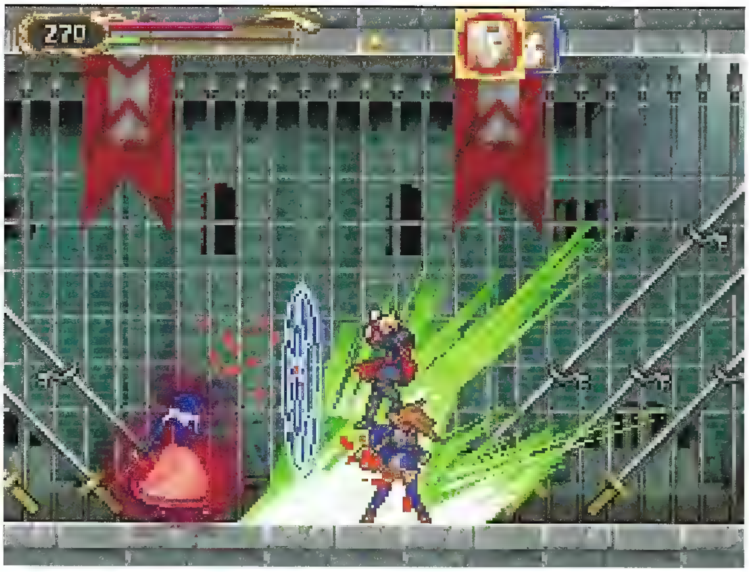
> "We will definitely take the series into the next generation. How, exactly, I can't say yet."
>
> ~Koji "IGA" Igarashi

It was recently announced that Symphony of the Night will be coming to Xbox Live!. Do you have any plans for the Wii Virtual Console, or PlayStation Network as well?
IGA: I'm not actually directly involved in those decisions, but I would personally love to see previous games in the series available as downloads. If we get the offers, we'll do it.

I heard you recently took a trip to the actual Transylvania in Romania.
IGA: Yes! I sure did!

Was that, perhaps, for reference to use in upcoming games...?
IGA: It was. I visited the historical Dracula's castle, Poienari...but it was closed (laughs). I went on a Monday, and everything -- the castle, the museum -- was closed. I knew it would be inaccessible, but due to scheduling it was the only day I could go. I got a lot of great photos, though -- the town and churches especially. It was truly exciting.

Were you able to use any of that reference in Portrait?
IGA: It was too late for this game (laughs). I'll be making use of it in the future.



Gorgeous as always...

People think of you as "the Castlevania guy", even though you do make other games like Nano Breaker. Do you have anything non-Castlevania in the pipeline?
IGA: As we move into this next generation of hardware, I've come to realize something. If we have too many games in development at one time, my ability to keep them all in control gets stretched too thin. I've made the commitment to doing a game on next generation hardware, so with that project and DS, my hands are totally full (laughs). For the time being I'll be working on Castlevania exclusively.

That's fine by us (laughs). One of the things most unique about Castlevania games after Symphony of the Night were Ayami Kojima's striking character designs. The two DS games have gone in a very different direction...will we ever see her return to the series?
IGA: With the DS games, we're hoping to broaden the fan base as much as possible. I think her art appeals to a somewhat older gamer, so with the idea of hooking new users on the series we went with the anime look. Of course, the next-generation home console Castlevania will be aimed more at the adult gamer, so we may bring her back for that game. I'd like to get as much user feedback as possible.

At least among longtime Castlevania fans, I don't think they were very happy with the change.
IGA: Oh, I know. That was a decision I had to make. I knew some people would be disappointed. With that said, even if the visuals change, the core game will always remain Castlevania. I always want to make a game the core fans will love. In the case of the DS, it was just a matter of trying to appeal to as broad an audience as possible. But I think the game itself retains the same spirit.

That's certainly true. Nobody can argue that Dawn of Sorrow remains one of the very best DS games. I did get used to the change, but it took a while (laughs).
IGA: I know what you mean (laughs). Looking back the change may have been too abrupt. With that in mind the character designs for Portrait of Ruin are slightly more adult-looking, less strictly anime.

We've run out of time, but I'd love to get a final message from you both for American fans looking forward to Portrait of Ruin.
IGA: If you liked Dawn of Sorrow, you will love Portrait of Ruin. It's all the same staff, I just worked them a lot harder this time (laughs). They put in a lot of sleepless nights. There were things in Dawn where they would tell me, "this is it! This is as far as the hardware can go!", but they've taken it beyond that point in this game. We worked really hard on this one, and I'm really proud of it. Please give it a try!

Yamane: We took a somewhat new approach to the music this time, while striving to retain the Castlevania flavor. If you like the series' music I think you'll be very happy. There are lots of remixes of classic tunes from the past, too!

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Tokyo Game Show 06 Interview

William Oertel

Silent Hill Origins

Play: I'm personally really excited about this game, as it's the first time we'll be able to see the Silent Hill world through different eyes, so to speak. How did this project come about?
Oertel: Well, it came about because my boss said he wanted to do it (laughs). I was already working on Silent Hill Experience, which was a PSP multimedia title. I wasn't sure what the plans in Japan were for future versions of Silent Hill, but my boss was really positive about handheld platforms and felt this was a good idea. I knew it was doable -- we showed the playable back at Leipzig, and I felt that alleviated a lot of concerns as to whether it was possible to do Silent Hill on a portable. Whether the graphical fidelity is there, the atmosphere and so on.

Why was Climax selected for the actual development?
Oertel: They have PSP experience. When we made the selection last year, PSP was still relatively new, and there weren't a lot of developers with experience on the platform. They had the experience, and were close by our offices, which made for easy management.

I'm curious how much input Team Silent has on this game. Did they set a story down in stone, or leave wiggle room for original contributions?
Oertel: The scenario wasn't written by Team Silent. We talked with Akira Yamaoka about the story, but it was very much hands off. They gave us a lot of leeway.

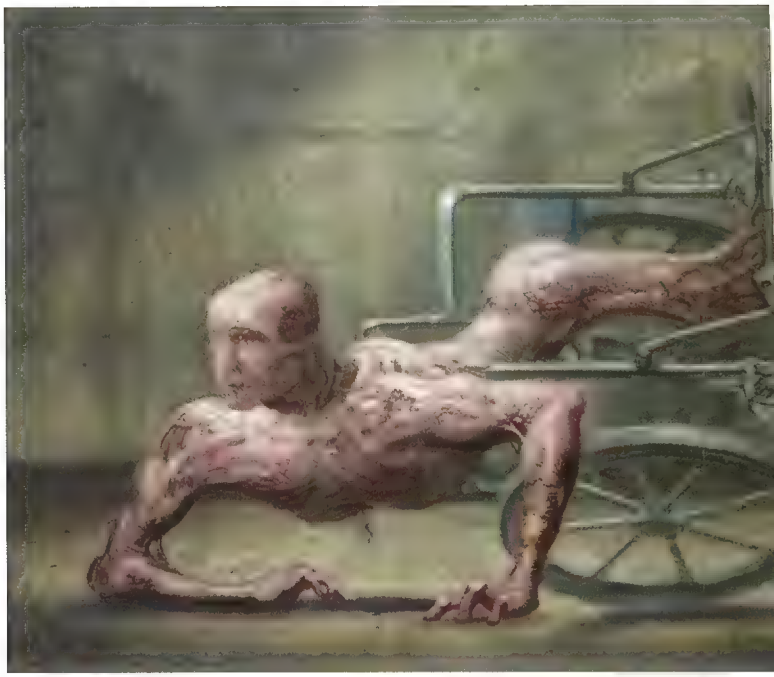
Would you say it was collaborative?
Oertel: Somewhat. Team Silent is working on their own project in Japan, so the story was really left to us to come up with. We talked about whether we'd do a sequel or a prequel...in fact, the original idea was to do a remake of Silent Hill 1. But when we looked at how much work that would be -- redoing all the graphics from scratch -- we decided to do something that updated the history of the series rather than repeating it.

Did Team Silent have any changes or specific requests once they reviewed your story? Anything to tie in with future games, perhaps?
Oertel: No, not really...which makes it a lot harder, when nobody's giving you direction, saying "this is what is has to be". The guidelines for us to follow are basically what Japan expects, which is somewhat nebulous -- "we want a good Silent Hill game!".

I've read earlier interviews with you, where you've said Origins is going to explain some of the ongoing series mysteries.
Oertel: Well, we're sort of erring on the side of mystery. We're not going to explain everything. For some people, it might not even be a whole lot. It's enough to tie the story into Silent Hill 1, but we do leave a lot of open questions.

Do you mean questions regarding 1 and the later series, or within Origins?
Oertel: The plot of this game. We don't explain things a lot of people are probably hoping to have explained. I think it's one of the joys of Silent Hill, to be able to discuss it, write about it in forums, talk about it with friends.

With this game being a prequel, does it start at a point in time when Silent Hill was a "normal" town? Will we see its transformation into nightmare?
Oertel: At this point...there's already fog (laughs). So no, it's not a normal town. It's not quite yet where Silent Hill 1 is at, but it's not a happy town, either.



> " I think it's one of the joys of Silent Hill, to be able to discuss it, write about it in forums, talk about it with friends."
>
> ~*William Oertel*

Will the ending of Origins lead directly into the story of 1?
Oertel: Yeah. There's a definite connection.

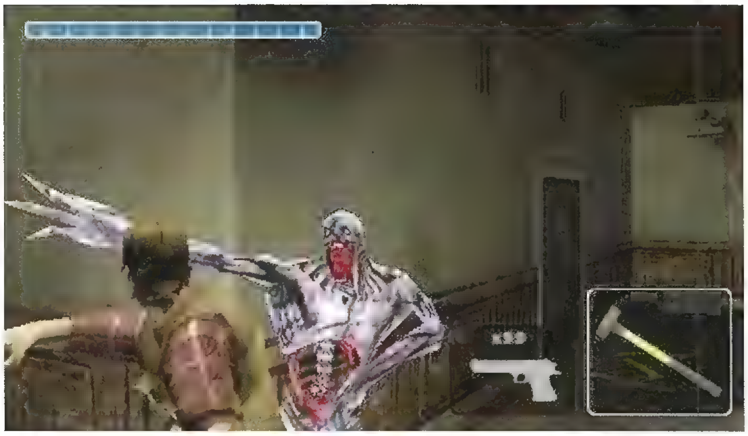
I haven't played the game yet (Ed. Note -- it wasn't on the show floor), but at least judging by the trailers it seems that Origins will be more action-heavy than previous Silent Hills. Is the control scheme substantially different?

Oertel: It's sort of by necessity. On the PSP you have more limited controls -- just the one analog nub and two shoulder buttons. Still, I wouldn't say it's a run-'n'-gun.

So it's not, say, a Resident Evil 4.
Oertel: Hmm...there's just so many ideas out there now, whatever you do it's going to seem like you're copying something. There are only so many control schemes and so many camera angles, so it's bound to look like something that's come out in the past. Because of the small screen we had to bring the camera in closer, just to be able to see what's in front of you (laughs). In terms of the action elements...when you use a firearm, you can't move the character around. You're not going to be running down a hallway, pistol in each hand, Matrix-style.

What about the controversial laser sight we saw in some early screenshots?
Oertel: The laser is gone (laughs). That was an early development thing, and I don't think it worked too well. We've found another way of doing the aiming.

Given the slightly more action-oriented



feel of Origins, are we going to be seeing new weapon classes?
Oertel: We announced most of the weapons back at Leipzig -- we have a .44 Magnum, a nine millimeter, and a shotgun -- those are the ranged weapons. For melee there's a shovel, pipe and sledgehammer.

I noticed in the trailer that Travis seemed to be able to switch between weapons on the fly.
Oertel: That's a preliminary thing. As to whether you'll be able to change weapons like that in the final, I can't say. One of the things about Silent Hill I hear from some people is that the control feels dated. We're trying to take some of the more cumbersome elements and bring them up to date.

Any of the more off-the-wall bonus weapons the series is known for?
Oertel: We talk about it. It's kind of on the fence, depending on how much time we have.

Can you tell us a little more about the barricade system we've heard about? Does it become necessary to block off access to enemies to proceed?
Oertel: That was the original plan...that enemies would chase after you and you'd have to trap them in other rooms to be able to proceed. It was almost going to be a kind of puzzle element. It proved to be very difficult to implement. The design would have taken a lot of time, so that part is no longer in the game. It would have been a nice feature to have, but we just ran out of time. It was either...we could have a great barricade game, or a great Silent Hill game (laughs).

Has that changed the game design at all? Will monsters still follow you into adjacent rooms?
Oertel: In the same area, of course, but not into the next load.

Will Origins retain the classic flashlight/radio combination?
Oertel: The flashlight yes, the radio will have some modifications. There will be the static, but we'll also have a visual indicator of some sort. I think we have to, since it's a handheld game.

> "We're trying to take some of the more cumbersome elements and bring them up to date."
>
> *~William Oertel*

How about the inventory system? Will it be more in line with the system from 1-3, or more like 4's?
Oertel: It's still under discussion. You're not going to have chests or anything. You'll never have to leave items somewhere and go back and get them. However it turns out, all your stuff will always be available to you.

There's all this talk about a more actiony Silent Hill, but will the mindbendingly difficult puzzles the series is known for make an appearance?
Oertel: The puzzles will definitely be there. There was a general feeling that the puzzles were getting easier and easier as the series progressed, and that the action was coming to the forefront. But out goal with this game was to also take the puzzles back to a more classic Silent Hill level of difficulty. The goal is to have puzzles that aren't simplistic and tie in to the game's plot.

Will there be multiple puzzle difficulty levels as in past games?
Oertel: Good question...that's one of the many details we're still discussing. It's not that we don't want to do it, but again it's one of those things that's a question of time. This game has to be such high quality, so unfortunately it forces you to make hard choices about what you can and can't include.

At least from what I've seen, it does look surprisingly good...one of the best-looking games on PSP, I'd say.
Oertel: Thank you. We're really with the way it's come out looking. The feel is not a problem, but the hardest thing about this game is the pacing. It's a combination of all these elements...the sound, the music, the visuals, enemy placement, puzzles, and storyline development. I think that's what made especially Silent Hill 2 so powerful...its pacing. That's what I think about a lot.

Would you say then that the primary inspiration for Origins is Silent Hill 2?
Oertel: Well, obviously it's a new character and a new story, and the story mostly ties in with 1. But I love the psychological aspects of 2, in terms of what the character was facing. We've tried to embody those elements within the character of this game. A few of the monsters from 2 and 1 are also sort of foreshadowed.

That's something I was curious about. I know you've been talking about attempting to posit devolved forms of creatures from later in the series. Are the monster designs from Japan?
Oertel: No. We did them all. One of the ideas was definitely to look at the monsters from later games, and attempt to integrate elements of them. One of the most obvious references we have is a straitjacketed monster inspired by Silent Hill 2, and there are a few others. The rest of the monster design primarily came from the story.

We haven't seen any bosses yet in the promotional materials. Can you tell us a little bit about them?
Oertel: We have three main bosses...but I can't say anything about them (laughs). They're tied directly to the story.

Can you elaborate a little on the story for us? We don't really know anything yet.
Oertel: Hmm...I can only talk about it the most general terms. You play a truck driver coming in to Silent Hill. I'd prefer for people to experience the story through the game and form their own opinions. The goal is to present it really well.

Since the game is tied in closely with 1, will we see the return of familiar locales from that game?
Oertel: Yes. If you picture the map of the town, it's like a rectangle...let's say we have one street here, a part of Old Silent Hill people have seen from the first game. Adjacent to that are areas we've never seen... somewhere been two thirds to four fifths of the areas are new.

Play: Will Travis travel to the Toluca Lake district of Silent Hill, or is the game mostly in the old town?
Oertel: It's all in Old Silent Hill.

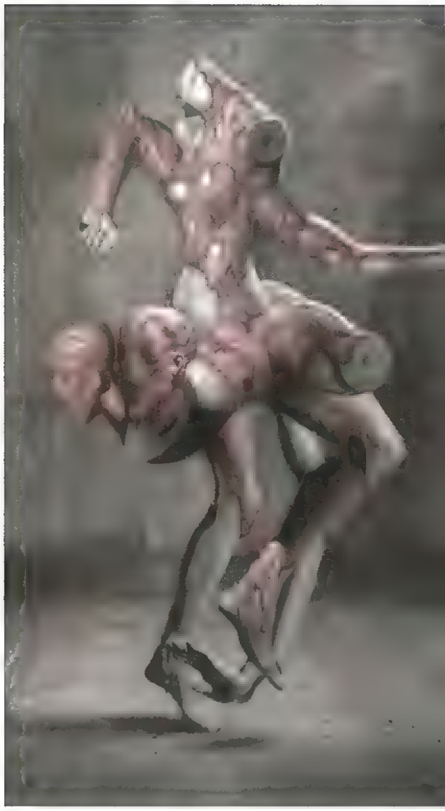
Everything in the trailers so far looks very classically Silent Hill. What are some of the new areas we'll be seeing?
Oertel: We have Alchemilla Hospital from Silent Hill 1, but also a hotel, a theater, a meat-packing plant, a mental institution...and another area I can't talk about (laughs).

Will all these areas have classic "normal" and "nightmare" versions?
Oertel: There are different states for each area. That'll be in there.

Let's talk about the soundtrack. I heard Akira Yamaoka (Ed. Note -- original series composer) was involved.
Oertel: Yeah, he wrote the whole soundtrack -- all 15 songs. Akira's a huge part of Silent Hill. His music features so prominently. It's almost not video game music, in some respects. He delivers so much emotion, feeling and texture. You can really feel what the characters are experiencing through his music. Of the 15 tracks, four are vocal songs.

Handheld platforms don't really lend themselves to lengthy, ongoing adventures like Silent Hill. How are you working on balancing the sort of moment-to-moment gameplay handhelds are known for, versus a home game that's generally played for a few hours at a time?
Oertel: One of the hard things is that we can't be everything to everyone. Every moment in the game may not really be facilitated to short bursts of play. We've strived to make most of it digestible within short timeframes by adding logical break points, but some things will take more time. There's no magic pill, unfortunately.

It's been a great interview, but our time is up. Any final words for the fans?
Oertel: We've looked really hard at the previous games and are committed to making a faithful Silent Hill. There will be some changes that people will have to accept, but everyone's goal is to have a complete Silent Hill experience for the PSP.



Tokyo Game Show 06 Interview

Noriaki Okamura

Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops

Play: Due to an opening in the interview schedule we've been given the opportunity to interview you, Mr. Okamura, but please bear with us -- we just found out five minutes ago (laughs).
Okamura: Sure, no problem. Just wing it (laughs).

There have been two Metal Gear games on PSP, not counting the Digital Comic. I think a lot of people were leery of the card-based gameplay at first but they were received very well critically. Why the change to action?
Okamura: We liked the AC!D games a lot, but the fans were really clamoring for a classic Metal Gear Solid experience on PSP. At first we thought a game with controls as complex as a standard MGS wouldn't fit on a handheld -- that most people would be playing on the go. But as it turns out a lot of people play their PSPs at home, so we realized an action game would be just as valid.

So can we think of Portable Ops as what might be called a "real" Metal Gear Solid game?
Okamura: Yes. However, the PSP is, of course, not a home console. We struck a balance between what would work on a purely home game, and the unique things we can do with a handheld.

Does that "realness" extend to the story?

Is Portable Ops part of the series canon?
Okamura: Yes. It's actually the first handheld Metal Gear to be part of series canon. It's a direct sequel to MGS3, set six years after the events of that game. Most of the characters that survived 3 put in an appearance. In terms of the chronology, it links MGS3 to the very first Metal Gear, and also provides a hook into MGS4.

Wow! A game set in the 1970s has a story link to the 2010s of MGS4?

Okamura: I can't tell you how, but yes (laughs).

Can we expect this game to shed a little more light on Big Boss' intentions in establishing Outer Heaven and attempting to provoke a nuclear war? Going from hero to ostensible villain is quite a character arc.
Okamura: Yes, I think this game will explain Big Boss' motivations well. He's lost the person he most respected and loved in the world -- The Boss. He's questioning his very existence, questioning his path in life. I think the real purpose of this game is to explain why Big Boss became the man we saw in Metal Gear and Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake.

The new TGS trailer revealed a young Roy Campbell, and a ninja character looking suspiciously like Gray Fox. Is there a connection between the new ninja and Gray Fox?
Okamura: I'm afraid I can't tell you (laughs). But let's say the similarities are intentional.

We've seen lots of playable characters like Eva, Sigint, Para-Medic, even Ocelot and Raikov. Is Roy Campbell playable too?
Okamura: Campbell isn't playable, but is more of an assistant. He's the closest character to Snake in this game, sort of like an Otacon.

Speaking of assistant characters, do they provide information over a codec, as in previous MGS games?
Okamura: Yes, the codec is fully accessible at any time, like a mainstream MGS game. There's no voice, however -- the voices in Portable Ops are all in the cutscenes.

Tell me a little bit about the cutscenes. It seems from the new trailer that they won't be the famous "Polygon Demos" Kojima Productions is famous for.
Okamura: That's right -- we took a different approach in this game. It's not that polygon demos are totally absent, but most of the cutscenes this time are inspired by the MGS Digital Graphic Novel.

Are the illustrations by Ashley Wood (Ed Note -- artist of the MGS comic)?
Okamura: Yes, he was kind enough to draw them all originally for this game.

I was reading in the new Famitsu about a system in the game for exchanging "business cards" with other Portable Ops players automatically. How will that work?
Okamura: Ah yes, the "Hello Work" system. (Ed. Note -- a national system in Japan similar to the American Unemployment Agency or British Job Centres). The Hello Work system will only be in the Japanese version of Portable Ops, actually. A lot of Japanese are very shy, and aren't outgoing enough to ask a stranger, "hey, wanna play Portable Ops together?". It's a way for Japanese to find other people to play with automatically. We decided Americans wouldn't need this help (laughs).

> " I'm incredibly proud of how this product has turned out. It's amazing fun."
>
> ~Noriaki Okamaru

With Portable Ops taking the PSP Metal Gears in a direction more in line with the console series, can we expect a game of comparable length?
Okamura: It's quite long. It might actually be longer than the home console games. It's not that the story is any longer, but the gameplay is. Portable Ops concentrates more on building a team and progressing through the game as several characters, rather than a linear story being told through the eyes of one person. To give an example...let's say you send one character out on reconnaissance. He finds materials you must have a technical member of your team make into healing items. That's a simple example, but this sort of squad-based gameplay makes the game very deep.

We know squad-building is a major component of this game. Can you take members you've recruited during the story mode, and use them in multiplayer modes?
Okamura: You sure can. You can also use members you've acquired in multiplayer in the one-player game.

How will you acquire squad members from other players?
Okamura: Well, you can trade soldiers then and there manually, but you can also set up a message saying, "I'm searching for this type of character; I have this to offer", and put your PSP in sleep mode. If you pass by someone with matching criteria the characters will be traded automatically. Those are only two methods -- there are a lot more as well.

Would you say it's similar to the card-trading in AC!D?
Okamura: Yes and no. There are simple manual trades, but you can also get recruits by beating other players, too.

Does the new squad-based gameplay open up room for more action, or is it still largely a stealth-based experience?
Okamura: Well, it's Metal Gear, so it's still mostly about stealth. You'll be controlling four characters simultaneously, so when you switch between them the other three will hide (laughs).

Four-character sneaking missions??
Okamura: Yes, you advance through the game as a team of four. Of course, if you had to control all of them at the same time it wouldn't be Metal Gear, so you only control one at a time and switch between them at will. When you do, your teammates will automatically hide themselves.

Can you put members in situations where they might be spotted while you're off somewhere else on the map playing as a different character?
Okamura: Usually, they'll hide in a place they won't be seen. However, sometimes this will be impossible, and the game will tell you, displaying "NO PLACE TO HIDE!". In this case you'll be taken into Alert Phase, where you'll have to run away and hide as in past games.

It sounds like a fascinating new take on Metal Gear. A final comment for your American fans, if you please.
Okamura: I'm incredibly proud of how this product has turned out. It's amazing fun. And it's coming out in America first (laughs). We're working real hard to have it out in December. I hope you enjoy it!

The look of the game recalls what you love about the series.

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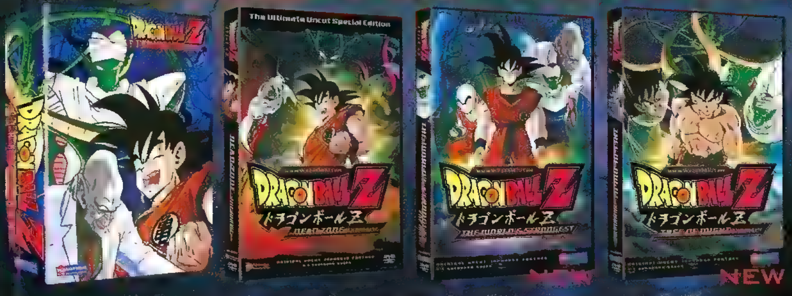
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GAME PREVIEW

System(s)	Nintendo DS	[illegible]	Nintendo	[illegible]	Now (Japan)
Developer	Vanpool	[illegible]	NA	[illegible]	NA

Fresh-Picked Tinkle's Rose-Tinted Rupee Land

Tinkle, tinkle little star...

[illegible] Dai [illegible]

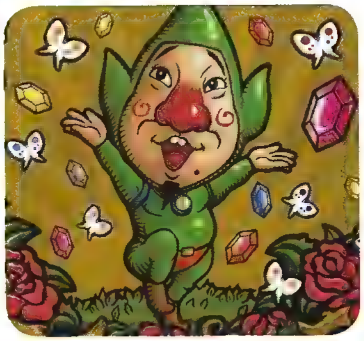
The title. The title *alone*, ladies and gentlemen. I can't be entirely sure what a native English speaker would make of it, but for Japanese...let's just say it's a combination of shock, awe, bewilderment, surprise, and the spontaneous joy that comes from something so unexpected. This theme extends throughout Rupee Land, a game almost certain to never see stateside release.

I mean, Tinkle. 35-year-old single man living alone. Green leotard. Red hotpants. Loathed by Zelda fans around the globe. You probably know him as Tingle, the single concession Nintendo of America made to render him more palatable for an international audience. Pairing him with romantic, succulent phrases like "rose-tinted" and "fresh-picked" is almost like being confronted with a dog that meows -- something so far outside the realm of expectation that one cannot hope but be intrigued, if not charmed. Just look at that box art. There is Tinkle, surrounded by Rupees, entwined with overripe vines and luscious roses. Butterflies flit about. The look on his face is one of witless glee. How can you not love this man?

The game begins with our hero living an idle life alone, when one day he is drawn to a mysterious spring from which a man-sized anthropomorphic Rupee emerges: Old Man Rupee. Bestowing the paunchy Tinkle with his trademark form-fitting duds and offering him a trip to the legendary Rupee Land -- a veritable heaven on earth packed with gourmet feasts, a life of luxury, and countless beautiful women forever at one's beck and call. While it's unclear how motivated Tinkle is by the promise of lovely ladies, he quickly agrees to the deal. The only problem: It involves pitching tens of thousands of Rupees into the old man's spring.

Now it's up to Tinkle to gather cash. Lots of it. One is almost tempted to think this is another of Nintendo's infamous DS training games, with the purpose of teaching children everywhere the value of financial security. But no: Old Man Rupee takes all. By chucking money into his spring, a nearby tower grows ever larger, allowing Tinkle to strap on his trademark red balloon and float to ever-farther areas, offering even more moneymaking opportunities. These areas take the form of familiar, Zelda-like overworld-and-dungeon combinations, usually ending in unique boss encounters. Yes, in Rupee Land, money is everything. The game is nominally an action RPG, but Tinkle's stats never go up. His life is his money... literally. You take hits from enemies, your coffers deplete. Lose it all and you die...for without money, poor swindled Tinkle would just give up.

You make the filthy lucre in various ways -- helping people out with odd jobs, simply finding it laying on the ground, and brewing

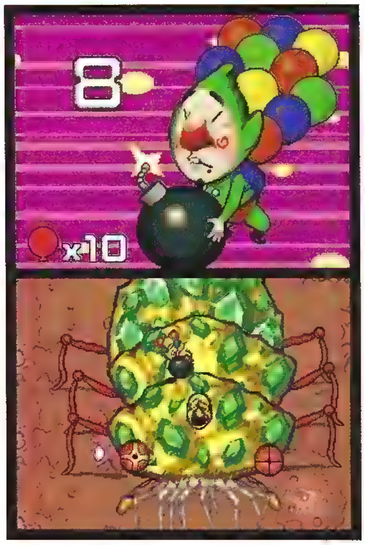


up items to sell in Tinkle's kitchen are a few examples. The entire game revolves around it: Not only does Tinkle need money to appease Old Man Rupee, but to effectively battle enemies he has to use it to hire bodyguards. You see, Tinkle is not a very manly man. Try to fight enemies alone (battles involve tapping the screen rapidly with the touchpen, a tedious affair and my only major complaint against the game) and the going is very rough. It's all a delicate balance: Spend money in shops and your "life" decreases. Hire bodyguards and Tinkle's goal of the mythical Rupee Land moves that much farther away.

The money system aside, things may seem on the surface to be an orthodox action RPG affair. This is only because you have not yet played the game. Rupee Land takes the freak-flag design first introduced in Ocarina of Time, later significantly expanded upon in Mask of Majora, and runs with it. It runs all the way to the end zone, folks. Aesthetically, this is easily the most surreal and bizarre product Nintendo has ever released: Townspeople all have something *seriously wrong* with them, your mentor is a demented, buxom woman named Pinkle seemingly living inside a TV in Tinkle's house, and the Russian folk song-inspired music is decidedly creepy. Call it Zelda by way of the dada movement.

In almost every conceivable way, Fresh-Picked Tinkle's Rose-Tinted Rupee Land is a product that approaches the genius only Nintendo seems to be able to tap into. It's no single thing you can put your finger on -- sure, the quest is lengthy (a good 30 hours or so), the hand-drawn pixel art sublime, and control rock-solid...but with Nintendo, it's really all about the total package. Sadly, Tinkle's presence makes the chances of this instant-classic (it blows recent handheld Zeldas out of the water) getting an English release almost nil. Check out the import if you can hang with simple Japanese text, and thanks for reading. That'll be 5,000 Rupees.

> "Aesthetically, this is easily the most surreal and bizarre product Nintendo has ever released."



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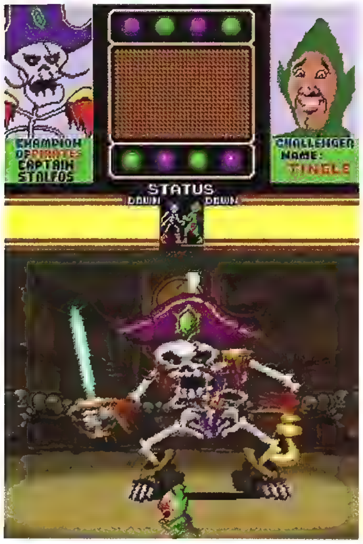

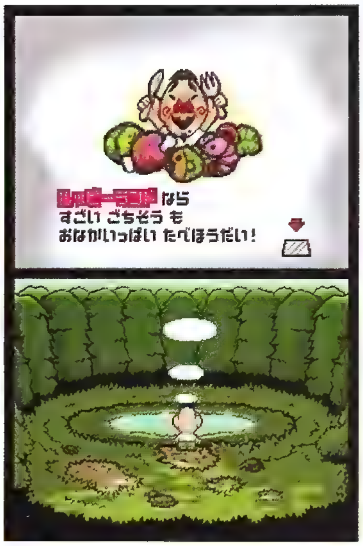

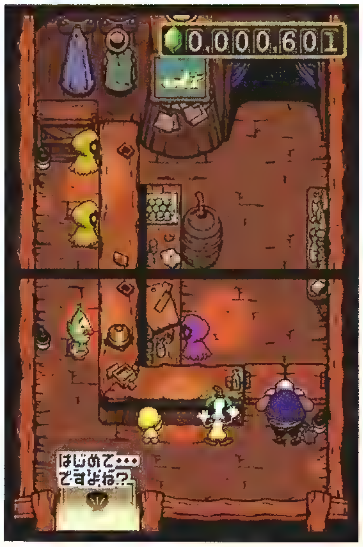

Fresh-Picked Tinkle's Rose-Tinted Rupee Land

score 9.0

+	Pay special attention to the delightfully surreal conversation scenes.
–	Game demands an excessive use of touchpen, when simple button presses would have sufficed.

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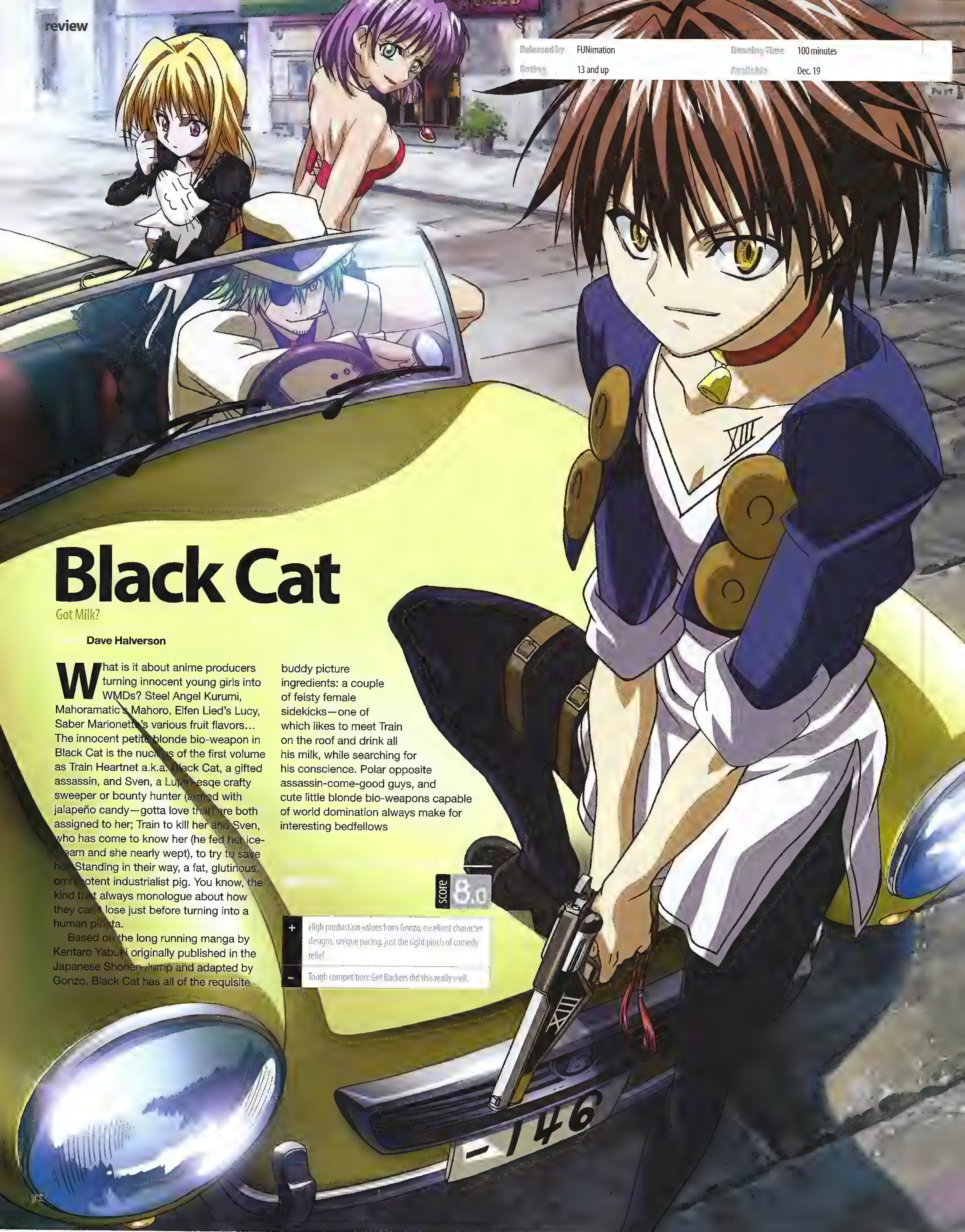

Released by	FUNimation	Running Time	100 minutes
Rating	13 and up	Available	Dec. 19

Black Cat

Got Milk?

Dave Halverson

What is it about anime producers turning innocent young girls into WMDs? Steel Angel Kurumi, Mahoramatic's Mahoro, Elfen Lied's Lucy, Saber Marionette's various fruit flavors… The innocent petite blonde bio-weapon in Black Cat is the nucleus of the first volume as Train Heartnet a.k.a. Black Cat, a gifted assassin, and Sven, a Lupin-esqe crafty sweeper or bounty hunter (armed with jalapeño candy—gotta love that) are both assigned to her; Train to kill her and Sven, who has come to know her (he fed her ice-cream and she nearly wept), to try to save her. Standing in their way, a fat, glutinous, omnipotent industrialist pig. You know, the kind that always monologue about how they can't lose just before turning into a human piñata.

Based on the long running manga by Kentaro Yabuki originally published in the Japanese Shonen Jump and adapted by Gonzo, Black Cat has all of the requisite buddy picture ingredients: a couple of feisty female sidekicks—one of which likes to meet Train on the roof and drink all his milk, while searching for his conscience. Polar opposite assassin-come-good guys, and cute little blonde bio-weapons capable of world domination always make for interesting bedfellows

score 8.0

+	High production values from Gonzo, excellent character designs, unique pacing, just the right pinch of comedy relief
–	Tough competition: Get Backers did this really well.

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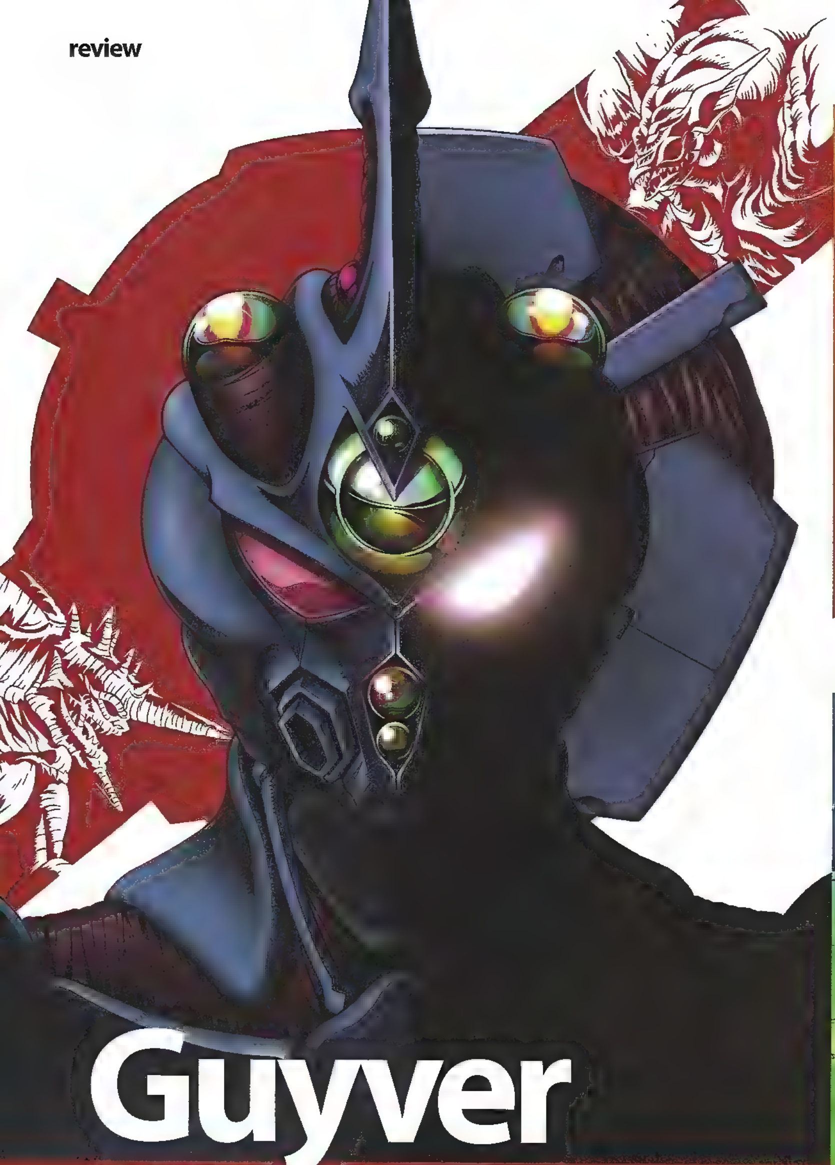
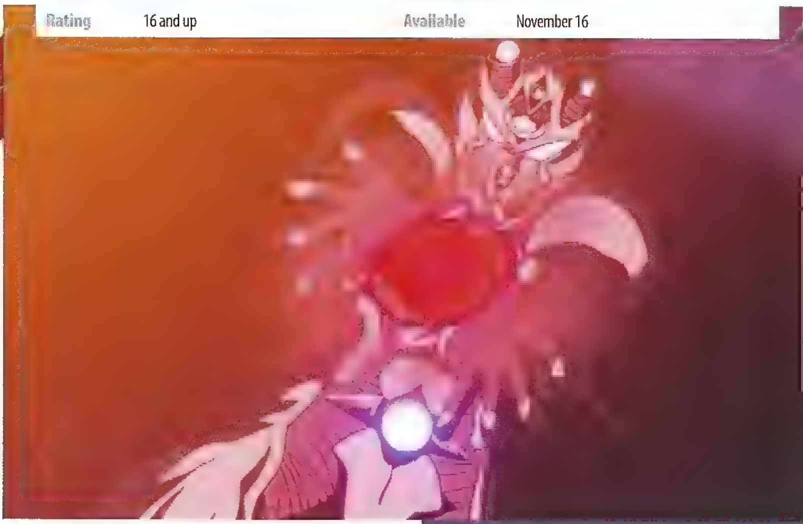


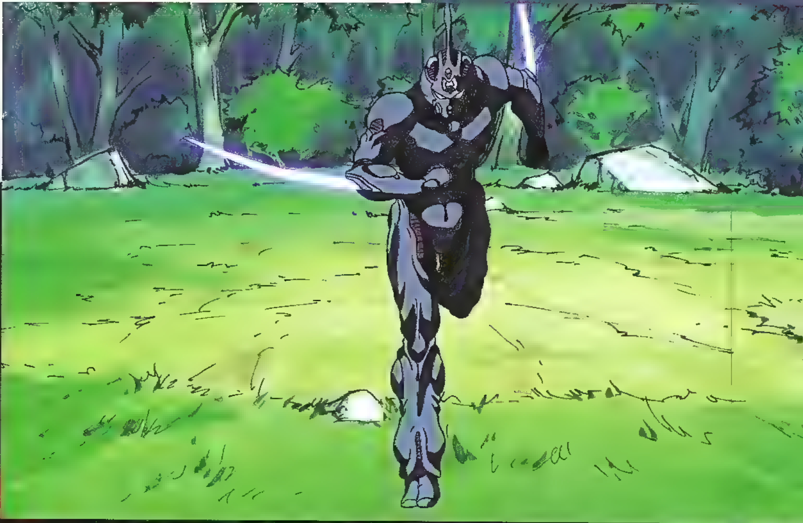
Guyver

He's got something to get off his chest

Released by	ADV Films	**Running Time**	100 minutes
Rating	16 and up	**Available**	November 16



That, my friends, is going to leave a mark...most likely red in nature.



> "Fans of Saturday matinée mutated beasties will love the slice-and-dice action the Guyver has to offer."

For the dozen or so of you who saw it, Guyver didn't start with the Mark Hamill live-action movie. No no no. Some 20+ years ago, it was a manga, adapted into an OVA series, which has now received the royal treatment in this latest incarnation from ADV Films.

When Sho Fukamachi and his buddy Tetsuro Sugawa stumble across a stolen Guyver containment unit sought by mutated humans—not good—Sho's life changes forever when he accidentally activates it, triggering a mutation that would make a Power Ranger blush; cue aqua bio-armored duds that just go bananas on the bad guys. Of course, he doesn't really understand what he's caught up in—the Chronos Corporation is, like any evil conglomerate worth its salt, trying to take over the world, and they need Sho's bio-boosted suit to do it. Hence, they keep trying to get it back (to no avail as it is now being used for the greater good—bad guys just hate that) and we have ourselves a Japanese flavored vs. fighting extravaganza. Sho's not so happy with all of this newfound power though (they never are). He just wants to go back to being a frisky teen like his buddy Tetsuro.

One thing fans will appreciate about this new incarnation is that it stays relatively true to the original manga source, give or take a few liberties with locales and plot, and a Sho that's not quite as bumbling as his literary counterpart. Tetsuro, for being the thicker, slow-footed best friend thinks very quickly on his feet, and realizes the implications of what they may both be up against. On the evil side of things, it seems to be more of an internal power struggle, and it comes off looking like whoever can come up with the biggest scowl on their face is more likely to be in charge. Fans of Saturday matinée mutated beasties will love the slice-and-dice action the Guyver has to offer, with his vibrating elbow blades, forehead lasers, and the single most dangerous nipples in all of anime, firing massive energy blasts from within his breastplate. The story however, while making good momentum in its build-up, kind of follows the same pattern-- baddies find Sho or Tetsu, attack, get defeated, rinse, repeat. This isn't some deep-meaning anime however, nor does it intend to be. So if you're looking for some monster mangling action you're in good hands…or tentacles, or claws.

Guyver

score 8.0

+	Oddly enough, the complacency of daily school life nicely balances out the monster run-ins, and Guyver's acrobatics pep things up.
-	Lack of real danger and tension in the battles-- you always know Guyver's coming out on top; bad guys are virtually interchangeable.

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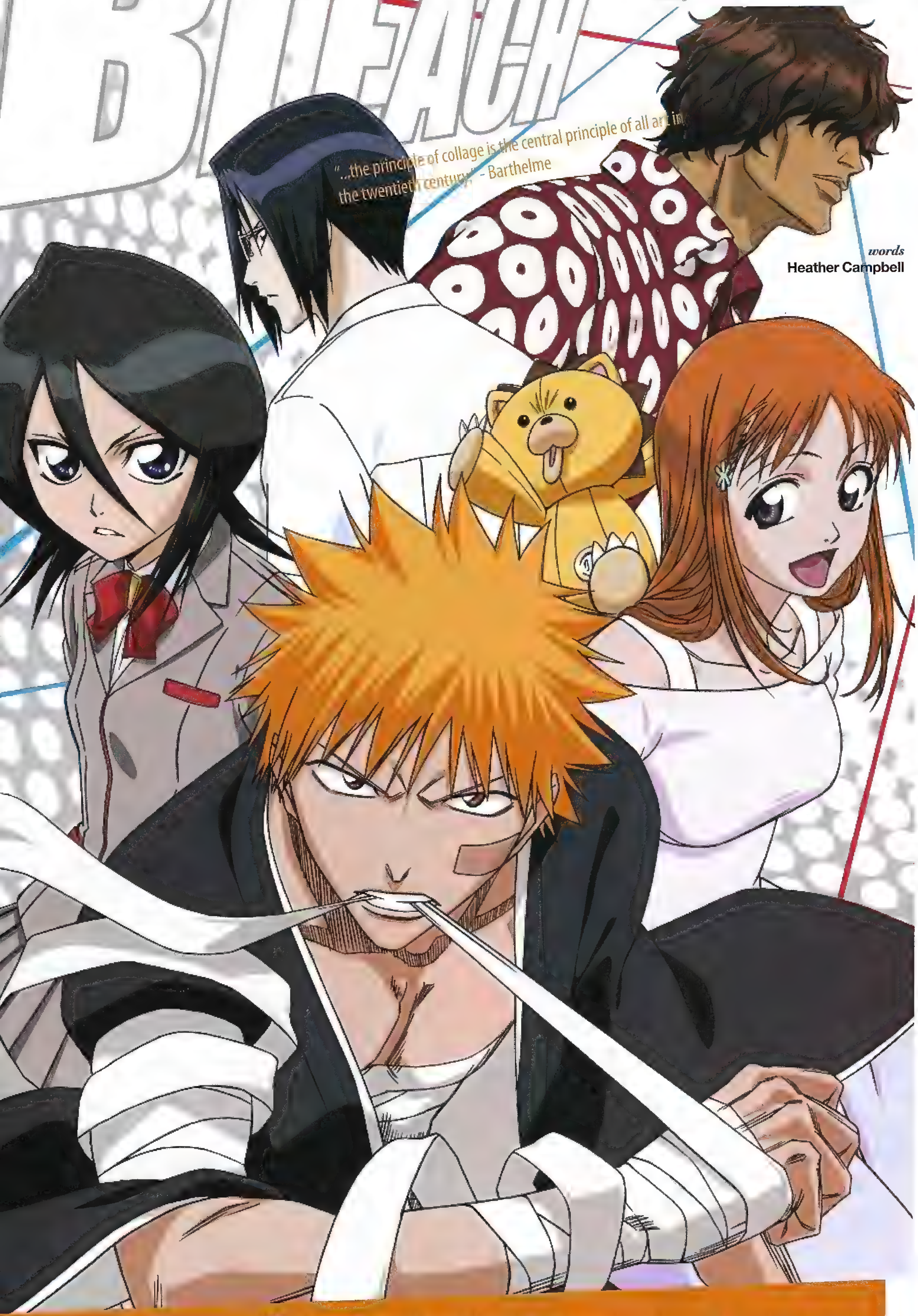
BLEACH

Released by	VIZ	**Running Time**	100 mins.
Rating	16+	**Available**	November 29

"...the principle of collage is the central principle of all art in the twentieth century." - Barthelme

words
Heather Campbell



Bleach is the action-packed shonen comedy series about death gods and swordfights. At its heart, it is the story of Kurosaki Ichigo, a 15-year-old boy who has been able to see ghosts for as long as he can remember. Turns out he's got a spiritual gift, one that he can use against malevolent wandering spirits known as Hollows.

After meeting up with girlish death god Rukia, Ichigo becomes a death god himself, and sets out to rid the world of Hollows. Every time he encounters a Hollow, he draws his soul slayer sword against them, and charges into battle with no training whatsoever. Responsible for sending them to Soul Society (or the densely populated, civilized afterlife), Ichigo masters his technique as he masters himself.

I've been thinking a lot about why Bleach works. Sure, it's a well-written, well animated show, but what is it about the silly orange haired protagonist that is so addictive? The truth is, Bleach is an ensemble piece, and it works because it pulls from so many different genres.

Bleach is anime collage. It takes pieces from all over, and combines them to form something new.

Sure, plenty of anime are inspired by what has come before. But Bleach has an unusual consciousness in its construction. You may not get the impression from the first disk alone, but Bleach has a little bit of everything—stuffed sidekicks, magical girls, priestly gothic powers, and even a little bit of 80's throwback, Fist-of-the-Northstar homage. Somehow, it all coalesces into something slightly offbeat and charming. It's anime through assemblage.

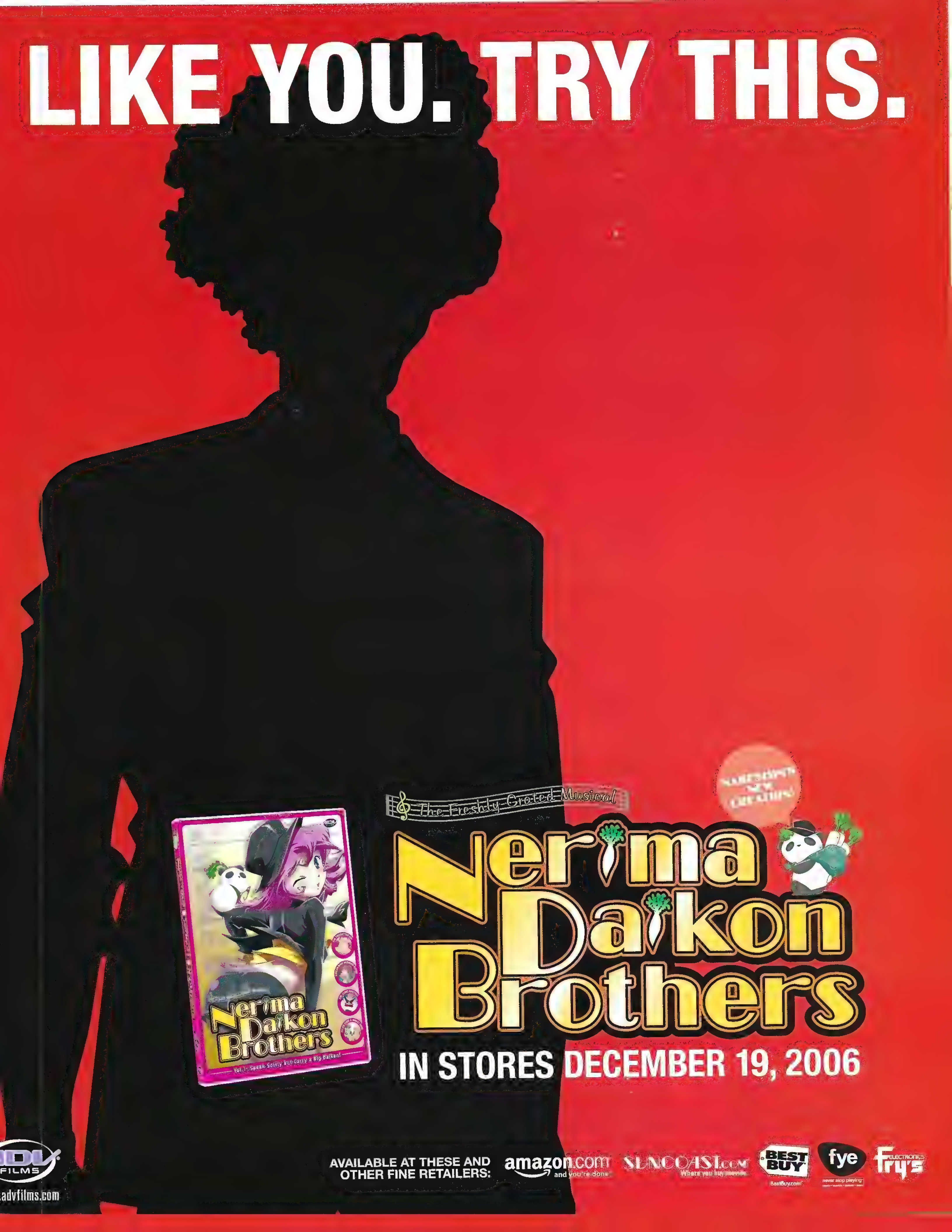
To see what I mean, you need look no further than the eyes of the main cast. Oftentimes, the eyes of a series' main characters are drawn along the same lines, with little variation; the unity of the design tells you who is good, and who is bad. Quite simply, it's how you know who your heroes are. But Bleach has some of the most disparate design in anime eyes I've ever seen. Quite simply, anyone can be an ally or an enemy; it's nearly impossible to tell from character models alone. Ichigo sports narrows slits with tiny pupils; Rukia's eyes are large and severe. Tertiary characters, like Innoe, have huge, bright eyes straight out of shoujo shows, and then there's Chad, whose simple eyes hide beneath heavy wavy hair.

Bleach, like Naruto, is one of the few popular shows that is actually good. It's not incredible, seat-gripping perfection, but if you're out for an above-average action-comedy anime, Bleach is a good place to start. The comedy is broad, but endearing, and the action has perpetual drive. It's going to be a big hit.

"You may not get the impression from the first disk alone, but Bleach has a little bit of everything."

BLEACH — score 8.0

+	Has something for everyone.
-	A little slow to get going.



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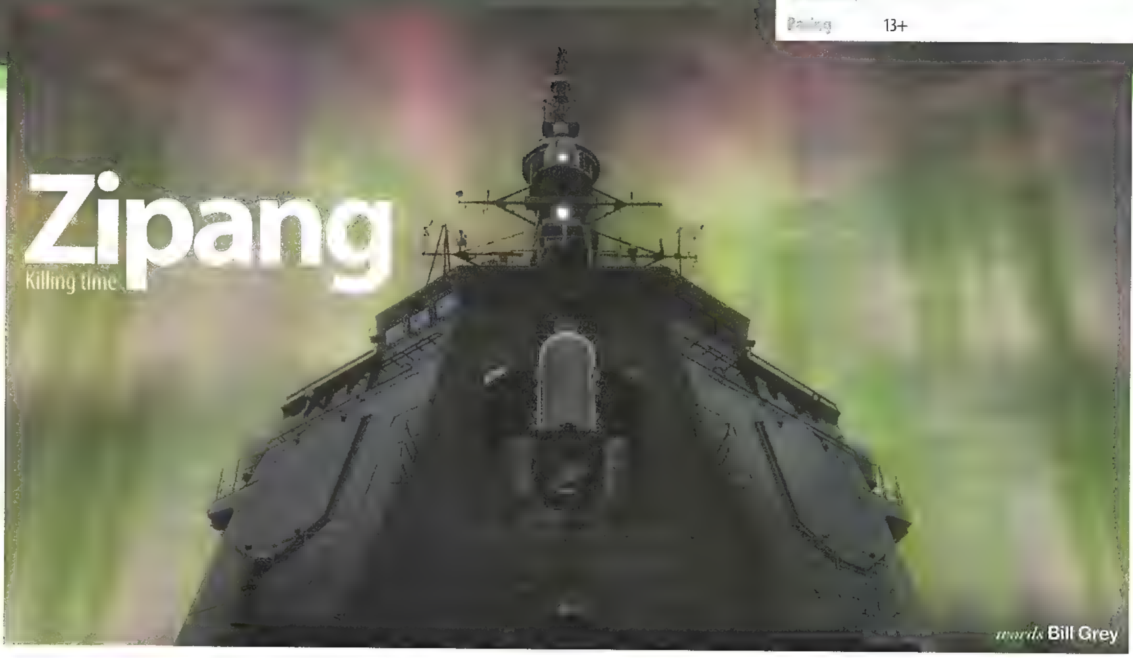
Released by	Geneon Entertainment	Running Time	92 Minutes
Rating	13+	Available	Now



Zipang

Killing time

words Bill Grey

Richly animated with an attention to detail, the show is a visual feast.

If *The Hunt for Red October* and Ray Bradbury's classic science fiction short story "A Sound of Thunder" were to have a Japanese child, it would look a lot like *Zipang*. Despite a name like the sound of a child's toy gun, *Zipang* is a mature and thought-provoking anime series based on the lives of the men aboard *The Mirai*, an AEGIS cruiser commissioned by the Japanese Self-Defense Force.

One of the most advanced ships in the entire Japanese Self-Defense Force, the *Mirai*'s mission abruptly changes when the ship encounters a strange weather pattern—a magnetic storm that sends its instruments awry. Once through the weather, the ship nearly collides with the *Yamato*, a battleship sunk *in 1945*. Though at first the crew wonders if what they saw was a ghost ship, they soon realize that they are the ones out of place, or rather, time.

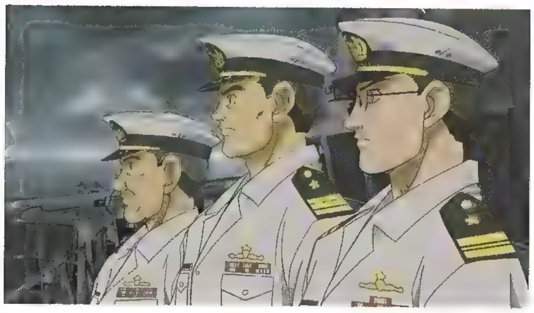
Events go from bad to worse—the ship has arrived the day before the Battle of Midway, a turning point in World War II which resulted in the sinking of four Japanese aircraft carriers. With technology more advanced than anything on either side, the crew must decide whether to participate in the battle, turning the tide of the war, or not to interfere with what, to them, is already history.

These are the central questions around which *Zipang* turns—*can* the future be changed and if so, *should* it? By messing with the past, the *Mirai* will change the future in ways impossible to predict, perhaps making it impossible for the ship, and its crew, to ever get home again.

Zipang wrestles with these issues as well as with concepts of honor, duty and military tradition in a way that's engrossing, methodically-paced and never dull. Richly animated with an attention to detail, the show is a visual feast, especially for fans of military history. Shots of the ships at sea evoke the loneliness and beauty of a sailor's life, while action sequences perfectly capture the tension and drama of a naval battle. Look below the pretty visuals and you'll find characters with surprising depth, especially the three protagonists, Kadomatsu, Kikuchi and Oguri.

Alas, all is not perfect with *Zipang*. Many of the shots integrating CG with traditional animation are slightly off—vigilant viewers can see where the wake of a ship doesn't line up perfectly with its hull, for example. The uber-cheesy opening music is better skipped, as is the English dub. Jarringly, several of the characters in the dub have been given hick-Southern accents, while others sound like voices straight out of *GI Joe*. I expected to see Oguri, the most egregious offender in this regard, pop up at the end of each episode and tell me why I should wear a helmet when I ride my bicycle. You'll definitely want to watch this one subbed.

Flaws aside, *Zipang* is a highly-recommended title for those who like their anime thoughtful, rich and deep.

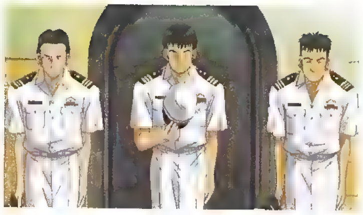


They're officers, and gentleman.

Zipang

score 9.0

+	Beautiful, gripping, thought provoking—this is what anime should be.
–	Deserves a better English dub—this is what anime dubbing shouldn't be.



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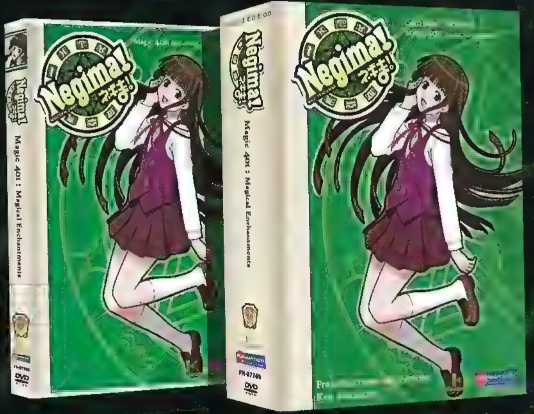

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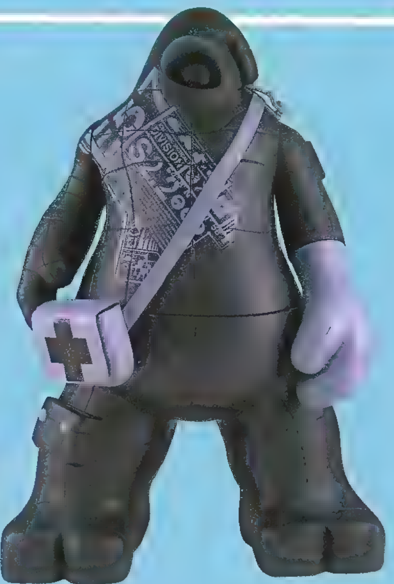


SUG Series TINPO

[illegible]

listen to this

GUN X SWORD
O.S.T.

Gun X Sword OST

Publisher: Geneon Anime Music | www.geneonanimemusic.com

Composed, arranged and produced by Hitoshi Sakimoto; when you've finished playing the greatest RPG ever created, the OST is the best way to reconnect.

watch this

ELLCIA

Released by: ADV Films | TV-PG | 100 mins

Chosen to keep the battleship Ellcia out of the hands of a power hungry king, Eira, a brave young buccaneer with tenacity to burn, embarks on an epic journey that will change her world forever. Ellcia is an older series but this is one that's gotten better with age.

read this

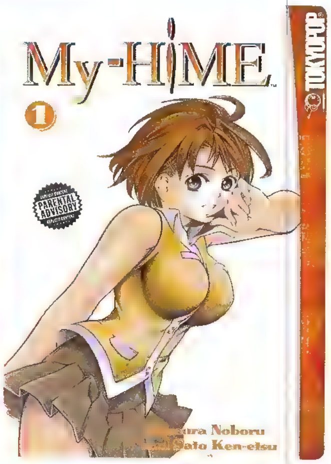
TWIN SIGNAL
1
SACHI OSHIMIZU

Twin Signal

Publisher: Anime Works | **Volume:** 1

Rating: 7 and up | **Genre:** Comedy/Sci-Fi

Measuring in at an adorable 5-3/4" by 4-1/4", Anime Works' Twin Signal—about a boy and a fighting robot that looks exactly like a human that he, er, screws up—weighs in at a beefy 370 pages!! It's like a little manga brick! www.media-blasters.com


My-HiME
1
PARENTAL ADVISORY
TOKYOPOP
Noboru
Sato Ken-etsu

My-HiME

Publisher: TokyoPop **Volume:** 1

Rating: 18 and up (boob alert) **Genre:** Action/Sci-Fi

When "orphans" (as in tentacle beasts) attack, who ya gonna call? HiMEs, the female task force set up to de-slime the Fuuka Academy. But where there is a HiME there is a key to trigger them. When one guy holds the key to two female HiMEs…Maybe you should cut that day. www.tokyopop.com

MANGA CLAUS
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The Blade of Kringle
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Manga Claus

Publisher: The Penguin Group | Hardcover

Rating: Teen **Genre:** Action/Xmas

Just in time for Christmas here comes Manga Claus. When a disgruntled elf and a horde of possessed ninja teddy bears threaten Christmas, Santa busts out the spirit-imbued ancient samurai swords and goes postal. www.penguin.com/teens

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Gungrave Archives

Publisher: Dark Horse Coffee Table Book

Rating: NR **Genre:** Art/Concepts

12 inches (tall) of all the Yasuhiro Nightow-based Gungrave art (based on the two PlayStation games Gungrave and Gungrave O.D. for the PS2) this gorgeous book also features two posters and bonus material not found in the Japanese version and is loaded with fascinating galleries, concepts, and much more. Maybe the best under-$20 art book ever printed. www.darkhouse.com

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First Look Exclusive

Purgatory Kabuki

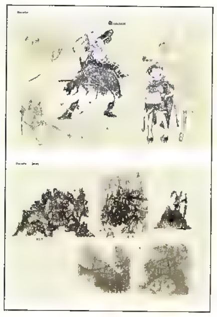
The Treasure gods smile on us once more

[illegible]

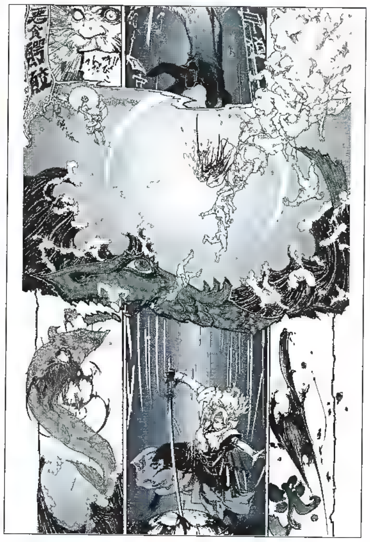
Publisher	DrMaster	**Genre**	Action/Horror/Drama	**Volume**	Preview
Story	Yasushi Suzuki	**Art**	Yasushi Suzuki	**Rating**	TBA

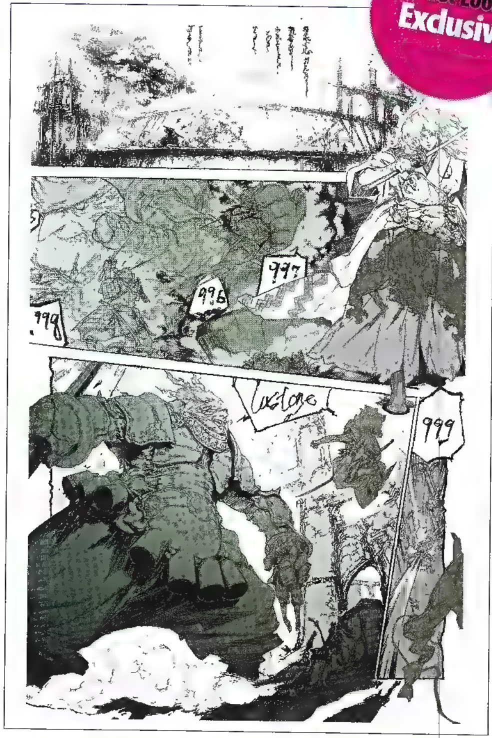
What if I were to tell you that Treasure conceptual designer Yasushi Suzuki, the artisan behind *Radiant Silvergun* and *Ikaruga*, was working on a manga in the ukiyo-e woodblock style? Well, I'm telling you. Originally planned to be serialized right here in Play, we're honored to bring you this sneak peek at this exquisite manga. Looking deep into the drawings, the detail is uncanny, and the story, about Imanoturugi, a samurai obsessed with leaving the afterlife so that he can die in battle—a samurai's greatest honor—is steeped in Japanese legends and myths. Imanoturugi must claim 1000 swords from the fallen warriors who now share residence in the dark underworld. By these means alone will this highly skilled blades master be allowed admittance back into the living world. But to what end?

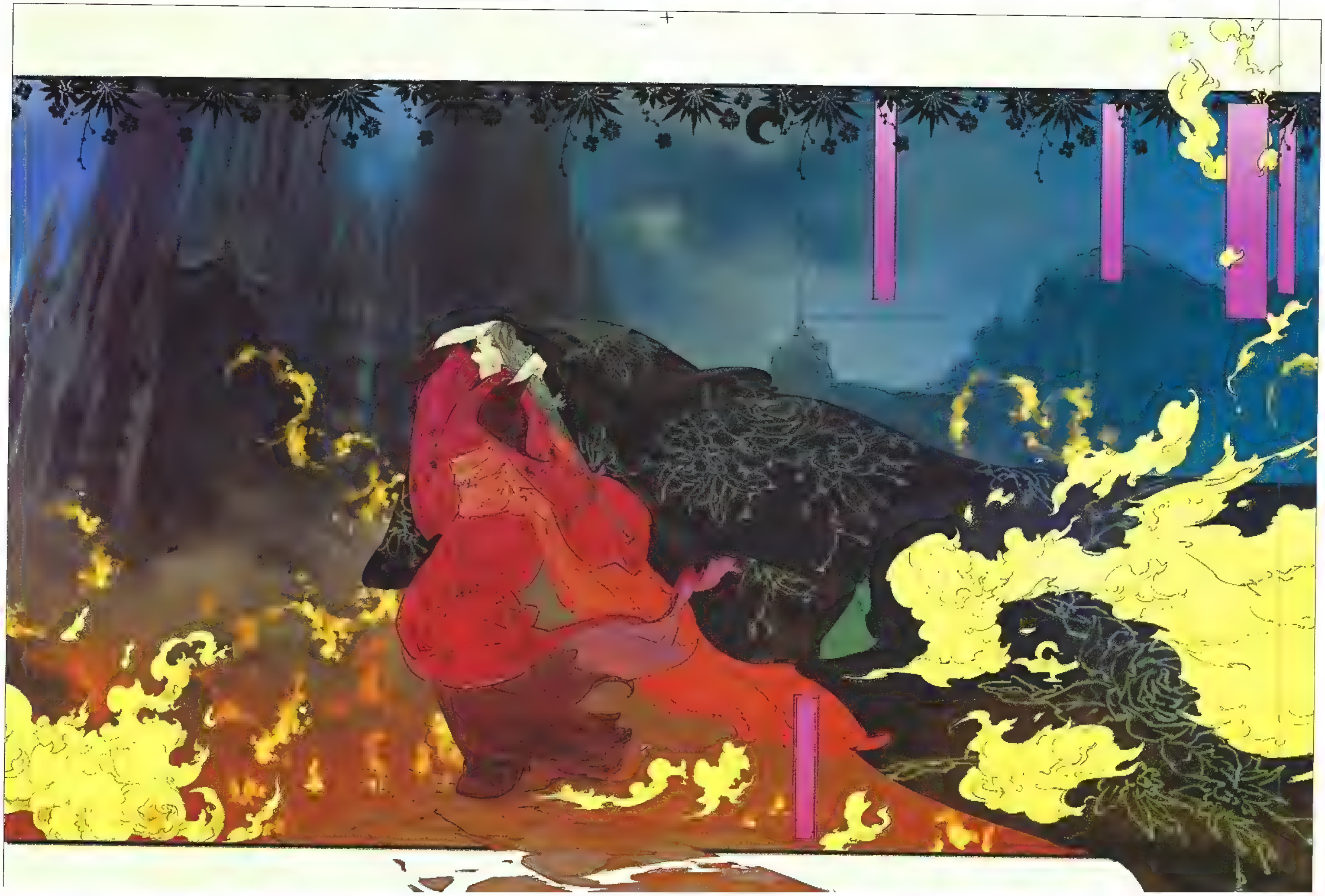
Read it if... You're anything but a corpse

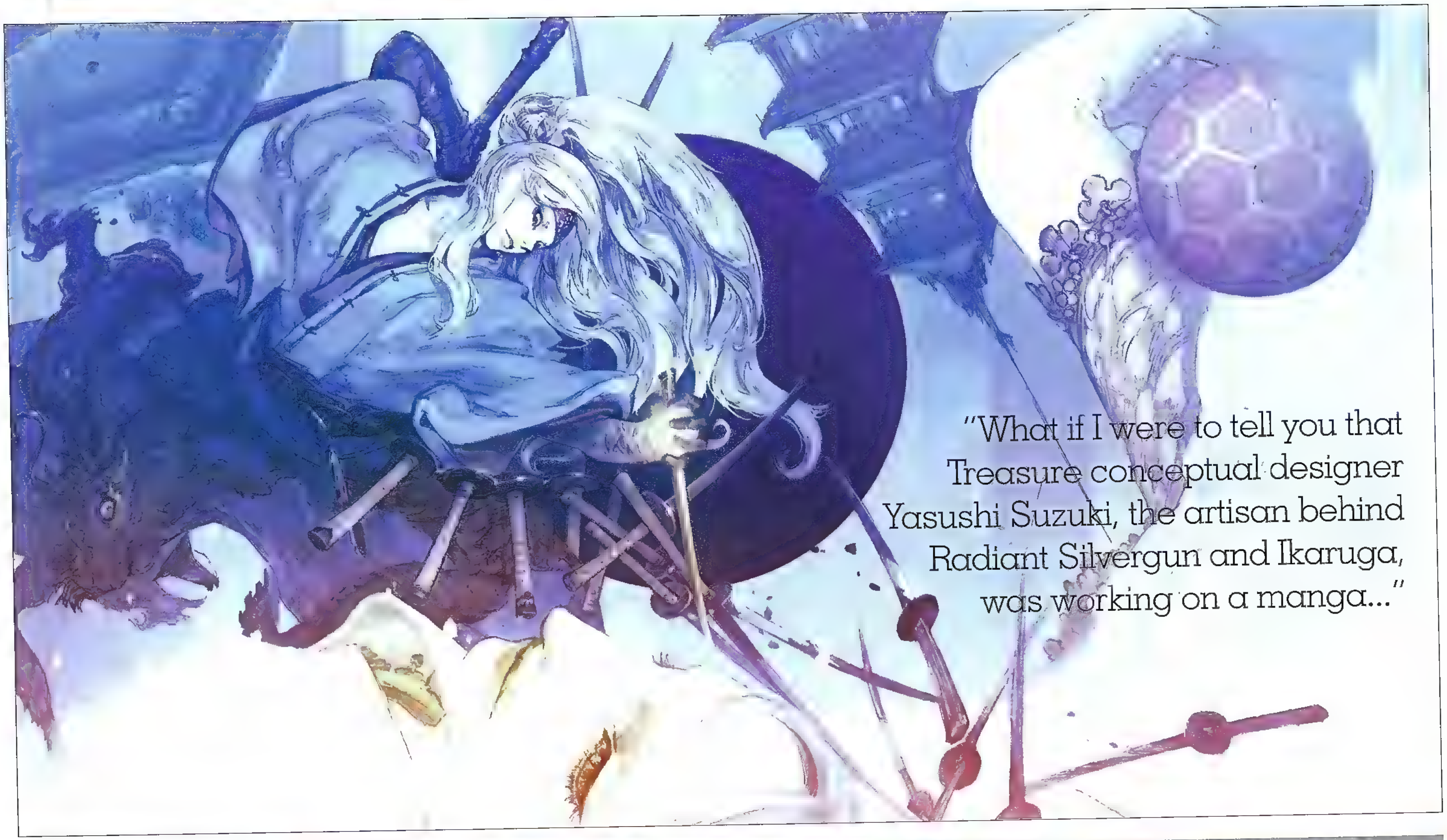


The detail throughout is astounding.









"What if I were to tell you that Treasure conceptual designer Yasushi Suzuki, the artisan behind Radiant Silvergun and Ikaruga, was working on a manga..."

Haunted House

Screamingly Funny

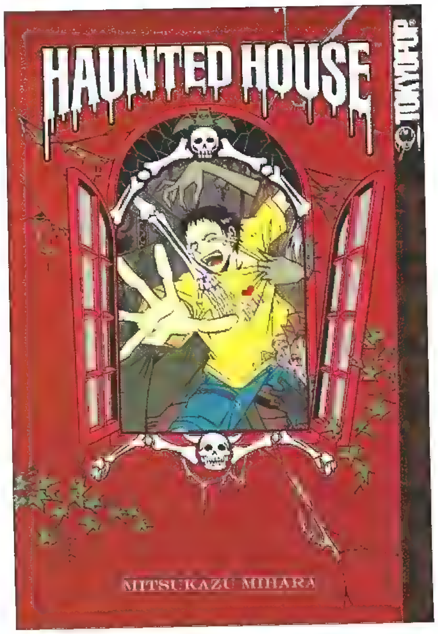
Bill Grey

"Sabatao's life with his own personal Adams Family."

Publisher	TokyoPop	Genre	Horror/Comedy
Volume	1	Rating	OT 16+
Story	Mitsukazu Mihara	Art	Mitsukazu Mihara

It's only natural to feel a little tension when meeting your date's family for the first time. In Sabatao Obiga's case, however, he's lucky if his date doesn't run away screaming. Mitsukazu Mihara's *Haunted House* describes Sabatao's life with his own personal Adams Family, who delights in tormenting him (and his hapless girlfriends) at every turn. Bathtubs full of blood, voodoo dolls, and skeleton feng shui all have their place within this freakily funny haunted house. Snappily paced, sharply written and illustrated, Mihara's short story is a refreshing read that ends all too soon, as Sabatao realizes there may be more to his family than goth makeup and macabre practical jokes.

Read it if... You've ever thought *your* family was weird.



Kino No Tabi: The Beautiful World

Take the journey

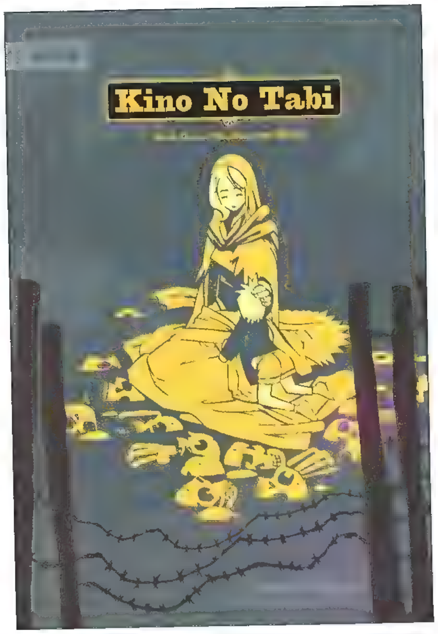
[illegible]

"Quite simply, the best read this year."

Publisher	Tokyopop	Genre	Drama
Volume	1	Rating	Teen
Story	Keiichi Sigsawa	Art	Kouhaku Kuroboshi

Kino's Journey, an anime of self-reflection, is arguably one of the best dramatic pieces of anime. It was based on a popular series of light novels, following the adventures of Kino, a young woman who, with her talking motorcycle Hermes came across individuals, villages, towns, that had their own way of perceiving right from wrong. The novels themselves offer the reader the ability to conjure their imagination, to see in their mind's eye the beauty and the horror that Kino sees-- from unimaginable splendor, to the most heartless of mankind. There is no one tale that a reader could not feel resonance from, even in the first six shorts contained within this volume. The journey is the destination. Quite simply, the best read this year.

Read it if... Kerouac wasn't your speed. Or maybe you're looking to make a journey all your own.



Nacho Libre

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

People have been giving me crap for not liking *School of Rock* for years. And convinced that it's an Adam Sandler movie in disguise—that ending, sorry, so not Jack—I've stuck to my burritos. *Nacho Libre* is a Jack Black movie. Like a breath of pungent air it washed over me like so many taco farts. Any film where there's an alley brawl for a bag of day-old tortilla chips, or a pair of pygmy Luchadors, sign me up in bold print! Nachoooooooooooo!!!!

But the story, she is deep, about a lowly monastery cook who dreams of being a famous Luchador, as well as using his naughty bits and cooking food for the orphans he loves that doesn't make them puke. So Nacho must lead a double life in order to pursue his dreams. Usually Hollywood would turn this into *Rocky*—he'd work out, get a trainer, and become a great wrestler! But Nacho and Skeleton's workouts (Nacho made Esqueleto, aka Skeleton, his partner because he escaped so fast with the chips) do little more than get them dirty or worse.

This is no *Rocky*. You see, Nacho really has no skills, and he rides around on a lawn mower with handlebars…But he perseveres…kind of. He has a big heart (kind of) and never gives up! Well okay, he does give up but things still turn out okay (kind of). *Nacho Libre* isn't "funny," it's better than funny. It's written and directed and was shot as if "Hollywood" never touched it. Extras include four featurettes, deleted scenes, a Nacho Libre comic book, Luchador mask creator and Jack himself singing two songs as Nacho! **DH**

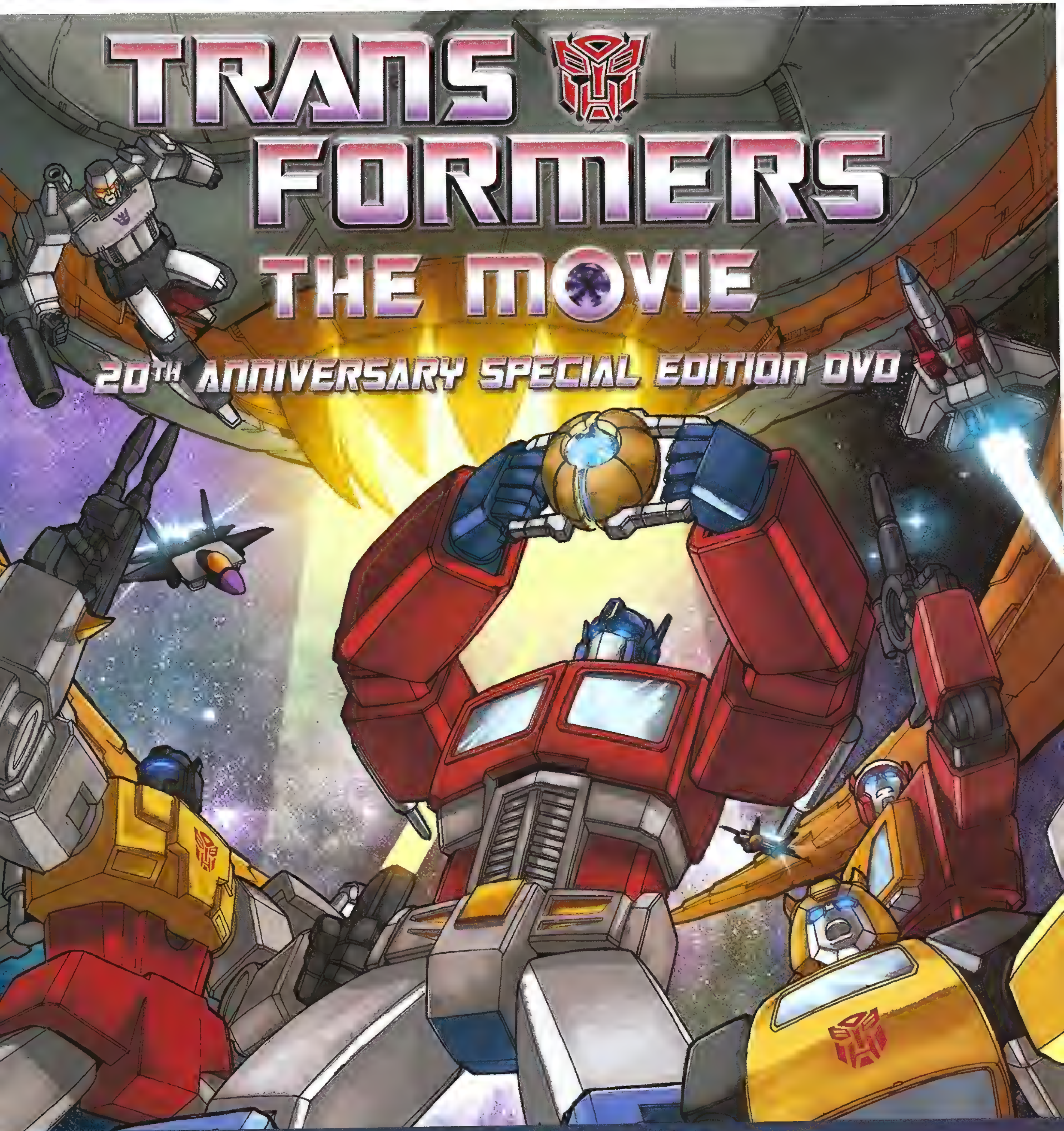
Mission Impossible III

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

Before actually seeing *Mission Impossible III*, I already suspected the movie would contain: at least one bomb in which a timer ominously counts down before a giant explosion consumes everything any good giant explosion tends to consume in summer action blockbuster extravaganzas. Tom Cruise likely getting punched, kicked, tackled, shot at, glared at, and eventually forced to run from that giant all-consuming explosion before being blasted against a solid object. People saying things in serious tones with serious looks, talking about neato technical spy things that we don't really need to pay much attention to while waiting for the latest convenient plot twist to signal in the next chase scene and giant set piece. Tom Cruise interacting with pretty and vulnerable girls and sneaking into impenetrable places with his latex mask. And Philip Seymour Hoffman injecting the film's entertaining villain with a deliciously subversive performance almost worth the price of admission alone.

While *Mission Impossible III* doesn't leave your brain that coherent after walking away from its overloaded 2 hours of slick flurry, I do believe my guesses were right. And then some. I never expected Tom Cruise to hang upside down in a mess of tangled parachute in oncoming traffic.

It's all good fun, far better than the overwrought pretensions of *Mission Impossible II*, and a little darker and more coherent than you might expect from the series. A few surprises liven up Cruise's secret-agent efforts to thwart the spread of a deadly virus—and even a few scenes of tension. Director J.J. Abrams may miss his attempt to bring more humanity to the character of Ethan Hunt, but the more subdued style—his television background is felt—ends up being a welcome air for the series. **BF**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BACK OF THE BOOK

Blah, blah, blah

12_06 HEATHER CAMPBELL
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

The Marie Effect

By the time this issue is published, Marie Antoinette will have come and gone rom theaters. The latest film by auteur Sophia Coppola, Marie Antoinette is a soft and poetic piece about the life of one of France's most maligned queens. Like Coppola's other pics (The Virgin Suicides, Lost in Translation), the film explores womanhood by lingering on the confusing tragedy of youth, and gently lures the audience into the quiet, private world of a girl on the brink. It's slow, it's muted; it's confounding and beautiful.

I bring up Marie Antoinette in Play because I liked it a lot, and as I was walking out of the theater I began to think about gaming and film. Marie Antoinette is not going to be the film that everyone loves this year. It's going to split its small audiences, and polarize critics. But films like Antoinette have a very important place in the cinema. Minor, more experimental cinema is what informs the vocabulary of movies on the whole. Film evolves because of what we learn not only from the largest blockbusters, but from the forty-million dollar risks that studios take every autumn.

Now, I believe Marie Antoinette is a piece that relies on the maturity of modern filmmaking. It is fully tethered to the present, even as it indulges in a retro aesthetic. Marie Antoinette exists as a film because of when it was made; the climate, the culture, the legacy of cinema that stands behind it, edging it on.

I wish there was a Marie Antoinette videogame.

Now, on one level, I'm talking about an actual tie-in -- a licensed product that engages Coppola's vision as interactive entertainment. But I'm also talking about the concept of Marie Antoinette in video game form. I'm talking about a forty-million dollar risk, an experimental, languid piece of gaming that has the texture of spoiled adolescence, and the patience of arthouse.

The truth is, despite the artistic achievements of titles like Shadow of the Colossus, there's nothing like Marie Antoinette in Video Gaming. Games are still in their infancy, despite the staggering, militant power of the next generation systems. Gaming is immature, but it's not because interactive entertainment is holding itself back.

If we make a direct comparison between the formative years of film and the current age of the gaming industry, it's easy to see why EA or Capcom isn't turning out Marie Antionettes. The way I see it, modern gaming is about 30 or so years old. Maybe 40. If we overlay that on the history of cinema -- if we compare the genesis of both markets, then gaming is about as mature as movies were in 1930.

To my eyes, that means 70 solid years of gaming before we come close to the independent, lyrical joys of a gaming Marie Antoinette. If we're on the timeline of cinema, it's going to be another 16 years before we see the video game equivalent of It's a Wonderful Life. Sony's The Sound of Music doesn't come out for another thirty five years. Microsoft's incredible blockbuster Jaws (again, not a tie-in, but the comparable game experience) doesn't arrive until 2051. And Nintendo finally gives us our Marie Antoinette in 2082.

We can, of course, accelerate this timeline. Games have witnessed cinema. The theory of visual fiction is not limited to the preexisting language of theater, as film was in 1930. We haven't forgotten the last 100 years of cinematic evolution. We can build on film. And, I would argue, we have to.

Gaming is going to get boring fast if we keep churning out first person shooters. The time-locked novelty of Halo will soon be as inaccessible as The Great Train Robbery. Sure, both feature exceptional developments for their time, but how many people really sit down to watch the cross-cutting milestones of Edwin S. Porter on a Friday night? Who sits down to play Burger Time anymore?

Some would argue that the difference is in the audience. But just as cinema investigated the boundaries of celluloid, and established more fans beyond its previous limitations, so too must gaming explore the world outside of gaming's stereotypes. If a publisher is worried that there won't be anyone to play their games, I say look here. I am a voice, shouting out, "We're ready!" Who knows how many stand silent behind me.

> "Games have witnessed cinema. The theory of visual fiction is not limited to the preexisting language of theater, as film was in 1930."

Now, at first, I'll get the Marie Antoinette tie-in. Maybe it'll just be a period piece. I'll get a game inspired by the political world of Versailles, some interactive version of etiquette and rank. I'll play a game wherein I move from a life of servitude to become the Queen's favorite. Deftly cradling the Wiimote like a tray of dishes, I'll head through a house of lords, holding the controller as a test of grace and acquiescence. It'll check my dexterity, and try my noble instincts. It'll be Versailles: The Servant Experience. I'll probably buy it, because it's unique.

But that's not what I want. I want an interactive poem. I want a game that cries out, "Don't push the button," just as the instruction manual declares that "X" is the only way to progress. I want a game that makes me consider movement as much as Marie Antoinette asked me to rethink dialogue. I want silence and abscesses. A game that goes on pause despite my insistence that we continue. I want a game that makes me feel something outside myself, where I relinquish my identity as a player with a controller, and have game-consciousness grafted onto my being. I want to be moved, even if it's in ways I hadn't intended.

This is what games lack. This is what games need. And this is what the games industry is capable of.

I look forward to a future full of Marie Antoinettes.

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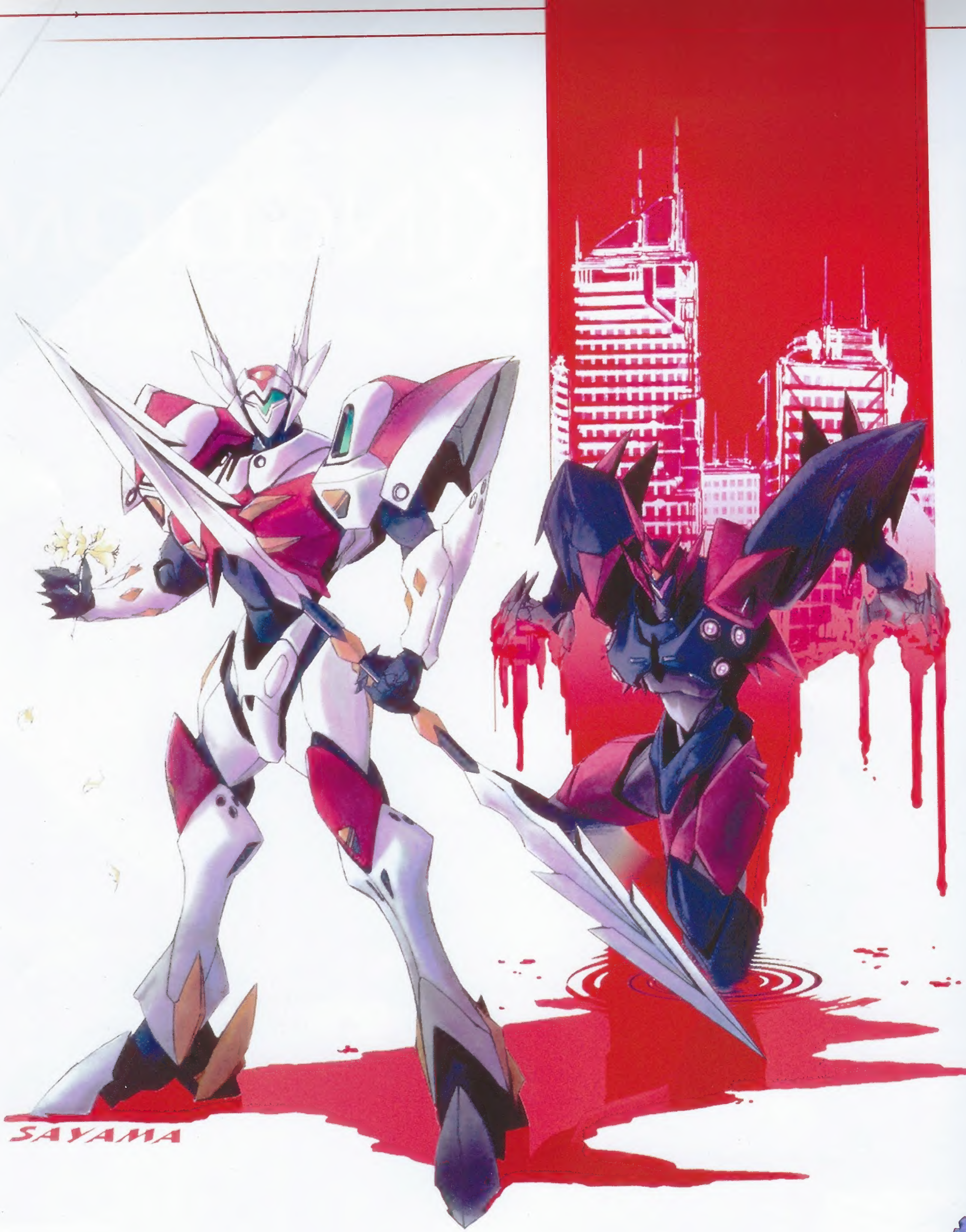

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